

RASHID SHAZ



HIJAB

But to What Extent?

With a foreword by
Geoffrey Nash

Translated by
Mushtaq Ul Haq Ahmad Sikandar

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"The bedrock of Islamic faith is self-surrender, equally demanded of all genders. Allah and His Prophet's wisdom, surpassing ours, established guidelines for societal harmony. They granted Muslim women the right to participate in societal and religious activities, a right upheld by the Prophet himself. It is not our place, centuries later, with limited comprehension, to deny these rights. Doing so signifies a patriarchal distortion of the egalitarian essence inherent to our Faith." (... from the author)



Rashid Shaz, a seminal figure in modern Islam, has written over forty impactful books advocating for Islamic reform, sparking significant debates. With a journey spanning from a revivalist childhood to a dynamic leadership role, Shaz has a profound understanding of the Muslim psyche. Today, he advocates for a major shakeup of the Muslim Mind. "A new Muslim Mind is the minimum to start with.

Without reactivating our brains we would even fall short of realising in full the nature and magnitude of our malaise", he argues.

Mushtaq Ul Haq Ahmad Sikandar, a prominent writer, activist, and researcher hailing from Srinagar, Kashmir, is a regular contributor to numerous journals and newspapers. His work extends beyond national boundaries, with frequent participation in international conferences. Sikandar has also translated three books from Urdu and is presently engaged in translating the 19th-century Urdu treatise "Huquq Niswan" by Mauvi Mumtaz Ali. His most recent work in English translation is "Hijab: But to What Extent?"



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translated and annotated by

Mushtaq Ul Haq Ahmad Sikander

With a Foreword by

Geoffrey Nash

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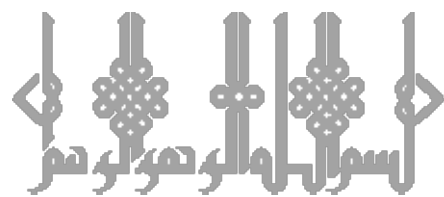
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Translator's Note

The veil, or Hijab, is a crucial mandate in Islam, required to be observed by both men and women alike. Similar to the concept of Jihad, the Hijab is often shrouded in a myriad of conflicting views, stereotypes, and controversies that persist today. In his book on the subject, contemporary Islamic scholar Rashid Shaz seeks to clear away these ambiguities and misunderstandings about the Hijab. The book does not solely focus on the dress code of Muslim women; rather, it broadens its scope to discuss women's rights in Islam more comprehensively.

As one of the author's early works, the influence of Islamic revivalist movements is notably reflected throughout the text. Yet, despite its historical context, the essence and message of the book remain highly relevant in our current era, given that the issues addressed continue to fuel present-day debates concerning women.

In translating this work into English, I have striven to remain faithful to the original text. It is my hope that this book will serve as a useful resource for a broad audience, particularly Muslim women.

Mushtaq Ul Haq Ahmad Sikander

Pakeezah House,
Srinagar, Kashmir
1 January, 2018

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Foreword

In India today, as in the colonial age, debate over the role of women and the scope of their activity in Muslim society has by no means abated. The issue of Muslim women and how they are perceived to occupy subordinate positions in Islamic societies continues to receive particular attention owing to the troubled status of Muslims in general. In the public arena in both Muslim and western societies the treatment of women forms part of a baseline indicating the Muslim community's backwardness on the scale of civilization and, however much conservative forces might wish to ignore the issue, its ramifications are unavoidable. In this small volume a structured and reasoned response to the question is out set in which the writer draws upon the Qur'anic revelation and the experience of the first generation of believers to source and instigate a message of reform which enables women's enfranchisement and their taking up their rightful role in the umma.

A concrete instance of the conservative forces that continue to mould the lives of Indian Muslim women concerns the treatment of a young woman, Imrana, raped by her father-in-law in 2005. According to The Indian Express, "her tragedy became a national controversy when Darul-Uloom Deoband, India's largest Islamic seminary" decreed that through her father-in-law's action "she had ceased to be the wife of her husband" on the grounds of contravention of a Qur'anic verse stating unlawful the marriage of a son to a woman married to his father. Rashid Shaz states the "edict issued by the Deoband seminary on the Imrana episode and its subsequent endorsement by the Muslim Personal Law Board has proved beyond doubt that our religious

institutions are not only unaware of contemporary realities, but that the luminaries at the helm of affairs in these institutions have no proper understanding of the Qur'an" either. Further, in an address to a women's seminary in Bangalore, Professor Shaz denounced the inculcation of female obedience to male authority taught in female madrasas through texts by established religious scholars, such as Ashraf Ali Thanwi's *Bahishti Zewar* which stretches to the point of purposing the wife's acquiescence in her husband's adultery.

What the declined Muslim society has conveyed to her is that as a wife she is supposed to be under the complete control of her husband. She does not need to exercise her own mind to distinguish between right and wrong, because it is the responsibility of her husband. For her the only essential duty is to bow her head before her husband in complete obedience. The opinion of her husband is supposed to be hers too and she is made to exist for the rest of her life with no individual identity as her own.

The experience of women in the Muslim community is undeniably and fundamentally intertwined with the perceived decline of the Muslim society. One of the significant reasons contributing to this decline is our increasing adherence to local customs, norms, and traditions, which, over time, has overshadowed the genuine spirit of Islam. In most Muslim societies, the roles assigned to women have become more entrenched in local customs and traditions than in Islam itself, even to the point where we've elevated them to the status of sacraments!

The contrasting advancement of women in the West, coinciding with retreat into conservatism and reaction in Muslim communities, causes further controls to be placed on Muslim women. One visible form of this is the freezing of women out of public space:

One can prepare a list of dictates to keep Muslim women confined to the home, but the factual reality is that slowly but determinedly the ordinary woman is seeking to discover her role in the world. Just point out the spheres of life where Muslim women are not present! We cannot avoid the fact that while discovering her role in the world, a

Muslim woman is far more inclined towards a western role model than an Islamic one.

Professor Shaz's enunciations concerning Muslim women primarily focus their role outside the home but within the Muslim community; though the domestic role is strongly upheld it does not exclusively define women's position in a Muslim society. "If someone persists [in believing] that after fulfilling her basic responsibility [of procreation] her role in the society is over, then it depicts his ignorance about Islam. He is negating the great culture and civilization that was established during the Prophetic era by both men and woman." The equality of believers of both genders is affirmed by Qur'anic teaching: "The core of Islamic belief lies in self-surrender, and this ...is demanded of men as much as of women". Islam considers the faith of both the believing man and woman as an individual choice: "like a Muslim man, Muslim woman too declares her relation with Allah and his Prophet Muhammad [pbuh], further declaring that she is ready for any sacrifice in this path. Thus the faith of a Muslim woman is her own individual act. Her act of faith has no relation to her husband, brother or father."

As regards women's place and mobility within the Muslim movement, Professor Shaz promotes a discourse that valorizes illustrious women from the pristine Muslim community as female role models:

The women had been the supply chain and support group during battles. In every important socio-political programme...women were omnipresent...there was hardly any battle in which Muslim women according to their capability and capacity did not prove as cooperative and helpful as men. This cooperation sometimes was depicted in the form of monetary help, at other times through poetry and eulogy, and on various occasions as physical assemblage exhortation.

There is an intended parallel between women's involvement at the foundation of Islam and a modern programme of activism in which women's role is integral "to reach out to the pristine history of Islam and make woman a part of the revolutionary struggle... In [the]

Islamic movement the personality of women is not marginalized to [the] periphery but like man she has a fundamental role to play.” The Qur’an states in unequivocal terms that the work of Islam will not be possible without the participation of women. “Women are as active in an Islamic society as men are. But their mobility and public life are subservient to these protocols that Islam has imposed over them. [Nonetheless] while observing hijab women can excel in every field of life. Islam has not just only granted her right to ownership of property, but she has the right to maintain it and if she can increase it through trade or skills she has the freedom to do so.” Wearing of the hijab is Islamic but complete covering of face and hands is not. Traditionalists have argued “if the face remained exposed, it would not be possible to stop mischief from taking place in the society that was already on the path of decadence; [but the] perpetuation [of niqab] for centuries has rendered [women] faceless, nameless and without any voice.”

The present volume is an important statement by a distinctive, progressive, contemporary Muslim thinker on a subject that shows no signs of going away as the discussion surrounding the roles women are taking up in the diverse societies across the globe and the treatment they receive in the public space continues to gain in volume. Professor Shaz’s principled thinking on this topic should be viewed in the context of his call for the emergence of “a new Muslim mind” and has been extracted from a body of his writings on this larger theme which are to be found in his recently published compendium, previously mainly confined to separate Urdu pieces, but now translated into English: *Islam: Another Chance?*

Geoffrey P. Nash
London

Author's Preface

The conundrum of women's roles has persistently puzzled men across ages. Often, ancient societies, whether due to lack of capacity or unwillingness, chose to diminish the societal visibility of women, consigning them to a sphere of silence and obscurity. Within the gamut of religious practices, certain Buddhist traditions held such severe views that even the mere contemplation of a woman evoked disdain. On the other hand, certain Christian monastic practices espoused a life utterly separate from women, treating physical detachment as an emblem of the highest piety. This spectrum of attitudes reflects the myriad ways in which societies grappled with the presence and influence of women.

Islam, however, charts a distinct course. In stark contrast to many ancient beliefs, it situates devout women and men on an identical platform, acknowledging them as equals. In place of curtailing women's roles in society or limiting their public participation, it instead allows for them, prescribing a pathway to piety equally for both sexes. Principles are laid down for women just as they are for men, guiding both towards a life steeped in modesty, chastity, and thoughtful interactions. Ostentatious displays of beauty and the potential complications they might cause are discouraged, yet the faith also appreciates practicality when what is naturally apparent cannot, or need not, be concealed: *إلا ما ظهر منها*. This nuanced approach acknowledges the essential balance between practicality and spiritual aspiration in everyday life.

In the epoch of the Prophet, the directives for veiling or hijab did not translate into a retreat of women from public or societal engagement. However, as decline seeped into Muslim societies, a small group of jurists, in their attempt to stem the degradation, advocated for restrictions on women's public and social activities. They considered such measures necessary bulwarks against moral decline. Instead of scrutinizing and rectifying men's behaviours, they chose to regulate women, often imposing domestic confines. This misdirected focus has culminated in a regrettable scenario where a significant portion of the Muslim community remains largely underutilized.

During the time of the Prophet, women, on equal footing with men, had the liberty to frequent mosques. The later jurists, who sought to retract this right, were overstepping their bounds. Both God and the Prophet, with a much more profound understanding of social dynamics, were better positioned to discern if women's access to mosques was a root of potential chaos or a keystone to a harmonious and devout society. Their insight, rooted in divine wisdom, should guide the interpretations of the faith and its practices.

This book embarks on an exploration of the nuanced and delicate subject of women's roles in Islam, endeavouring to mend the fissures within the Ummah. It attempts to unravel the Quran's perspective on this matter, drawing on principles that resonate with the spirit of the Holy Scripture and the historical tapestry of the Prophetic era—a period that bears witness to women's significant involvement in the formation and growth of the faith. A religion that witnessed women at the forefront of pivotal moments and movements cannot justifiably shut its doors to the active participation of its contemporary female adherents.

Consider this: the first to believe in Prophet Muhammad's [pbuh] message was a woman, Khadija bint Khoild [may Allah be pleased with her]. In testament to her pivotal role, the Prophet [pbuh] would often say, "She put her faith in me when others dismissed the divine message. She offered solace and encouragement when others chose to sever their ties." Furthermore, the first to embrace martyrdom in the

name of Islam, Sumaiya [May Allah be pleased with her], was a woman. Women were very much present during critical junctures like the 'pledge of Uqaba', standing shoulder to shoulder with the Prophet and the early converts. A vision of an Islamic socio-political landscape devoid of active female involvement is simply unfathomable.

Ponder an Islam without Syeda Ayesha - we would find a considerable gap in the rich tapestry of Islamic jurisprudence. Even the Prophet's nearest companions frequently sought her wisdom and learned from her on myriad religious matters. Syeda Ayesha [may Allah be pleased with her] served as a lighthouse of gender equality in Islam's infancy, at a time when the prevailing winds were predominantly patriarchal. She held a place of influence in the society of Medina - a respected scholar, orator, and educator, who not only garnered widespread acceptance but also stepped into leadership, deftly navigating the often intricate terrain of social and political issues. Her life stands as a testament to the critical role women can, and indeed should, play in Islamic society.

There's a persistent yet unfounded claim, often propagated through inaccurately attributed Hadith, that women are deficient in wisdom and faith. However, who could question the depth of understanding and wisdom demonstrated by Syeda Ayesha in religious matters? Time and again, women have showcased remarkable insight and sagacity. Hafiz Zahbi, in his work *Meezan al Etedaal*, notes that while many male narrators were accused of fabricating Hadith, not a single woman narrator was implicated in such a manner. Therefore, the question that begs attention is: why do we see such sparse trust placed on the intellect and thoughts of women in Muslim societies? It's a question that warrants reflection, and perhaps a re-evaluation of our preconceived notions.

The Holy Quran explicitly states that gender has no bearing on the reception of truth. When the Queen of Sheba encountered the message of truth and recognized Solomon as a true Prophet, she openly professed her faith in Solomon's God. Conversely, when Pharaoh, a man, was presented with a similar message by Prophet Moses [pbuh],

he outright rejected it. Under the reign of the Queen of Sheba, her entire people embraced Islam and monotheism, while Pharaoh's male-dominated rule guided his followers towards a path of suffering and ruin in both this world and the next. As such, womanhood presents no barrier to the pursuit of piety and awareness of God. The Quran's accounts serve as a powerful reminder that spiritual wisdom and leadership are not gender-bound.

The Quran's admiration of the Queen of Sheba's exceptional character has echoed through the corridors of Muslim history. For instance, the political leadership demonstrated by Syeda Ayesha during the Battle of Camel etched a significant precedent for female leadership, one that continues to motivate successive generations of women. Those who view Benazir Bhutto's prime ministership as the first instance of female leadership in Muslim history, attributing it to Western influence, may not be fully cognizant of the intricate mosaic of our historical legacy. The narrative of empowered female leaders is woven into the very fabric of our past, and recognizing it allows us to better understand our present and shape our future.

Even during phases of decline in Muslim history, it is vital to recall the remarkable moments when female leadership emerged amidst turmoil. For instance, Asmat Aldeen, more commonly known as Shajratul Durr, seized the military helm following the demise of her husband Salahuddin amidst the Crusades. She ascended to such a position of power that she was able to capture French King Louis IX, even declaring herself Queen. Under her rule, coins were struck and Friday sermons were recited in her name, affirming her authority. These episodes serve as powerful reminders of the strength and resilience of women in the face of adversity, and of their capacity to lead even in the most challenging of circumstances.

The annals of the 13th century are rich with the stories of women who ruled Muslim states. From Razia Sultana in Delhi, Safooratul Deen Malik Khatoon and Sa'atibek Khan in West Asia, to Taj Alam and Nur Alam in Indonesia, the narrative was clear: women could lead. More recently, the rise of the Begums of Bhopal was not an aberration;

rather, it was an extension of a long-standing tradition that takes root in the Quran's homage to the Queen of Sheba. The past offers us abundant examples of influential female leaders that challenge the oft-accepted narrative, illuminating an oft-overlooked aspect of our heritage.

Ironically, in a surprising turn of events, the custodians of this revolutionary scripture today, swayed by external cultural influences, seem inclined to deprive women of the roles that Islam traditionally accords them. Regrettably, this curtailing of women's roles is often conducted under the banner of Islam itself. This book aims to cut through these misconceptions, emphasizing the essential and diverse roles women are not only capable of but are also encouraged to undertake within the Islamic tradition. It strives to restore balance and shed light on the rich and empowering legacy that has been veiled by time and reinterpretation.

Rashid Shaz

Unveiling the Islamic Perspective on the Veil

A common fallacy, all too frequently circulated, suggests that Muslim women were little more than observers in the transformative genesis of Islam. This skewed perspective reduces them to background players, portrayed as mere cheerleaders applauding their valiant husbands, or as resilient figures stoically bearing the turbulence of revolutionary upheavals. Regardless of their roles as wives, daughters, or mothers, they are primarily seen as silent supporters, fueling the spirit of a struggle that's typically viewed as the purview of men. The idea that women might step into the limelight, actively participating in the revolution, or even outshining men in their religious commitment, is an unspoken thought, infrequently conceptualized or voiced.

Sadly, the societal evolution within the Muslim world has fostered a narrative where a wife is seen under the overarching dominion of her husband. The space for her to wield her individual judgment to distinguish right from wrong is often deemed encroached, as this task is seen as her husband's domain. Her primary function, as dictated by this viewpoint, is to capitulate to her husband in an unerring show of obedience. As a result, her husband's beliefs are foisted upon her, leaving her existing without a discernible identity of her own. This

viewpoint calls for careful reconsideration and reformulation, to pave the way for a more balanced comprehension of women's roles in Islam.

Has traditional Muslim society ever truly equipped a woman to harness her vitality towards the progress of Islam? Countless women find themselves restrained from voicing their perspectives on even the most mundane domestic affairs, let alone possessing a profound grasp of global shifts. A considerable component of our societal regression lies in the eclipsing of Islamic principles by the weight of local customs, ideologies, norms, and traditions.

In many Muslim societies, the roles assigned to women have become more deeply rooted in local traditions than in Islam itself, yet we've elevated these practices to the status of sacred rites. The truth, however, is that the women of the Prophetic era differ significantly from the traditional religious women of our times.

Those who yearn for a revival of Islamic pre-eminence must come to terms with the crucial need to marshal the collective might of the Muslim community. The overarching success of Islamic undertakings hinges on this unity. Muslim men must surpass the limitations imposed by local customs, thus creating room for women to realize the roles envisioned for them within the wide breadth of Islam. The narrative of the first generation of Muslims serves as a testament to this verity.

In societies where Islamic teachings have become intertwined with local traditions and culture, it has become challenging for ordinary Muslims to distinguish between the two. In such environments, where doors that Islam has kept open are shut due to fear of mischief and disruption, the entire Ummah is caught in a profound state of psychological paralysis. Ulema and theologians, reacting to these circumstances, have often rallied more for the protection of Shariah than advocating for its fresh implementation.

In such bleak circumstances, reintroducing the pristine message of Islam and incorporating women into the revolutionary struggle seems daunting, if not impossible. People, accustomed to political subjugation for so long, often think only in terms of protection, living

within a world of demands. To expect them to make sacrifices for the global supremacy of Islam and to include their women in this struggle would necessitate a prolonged and dedicated effort.

An ideological revolution, nothing less, would be adequate. But such a revolution cannot even begin until the Muslim society has revived the fundamentals of the Quran and Sunnah. The ineffective ideas and concepts that have become pervasive during a lengthy period of colonial dominance need to be discarded.

Muslim women must reclaim the rights that Allah and Prophet Muhammad have granted them, demanding nothing beyond what is allocated for them according to the dictates of Allah and the Prophet. As the Quranic verse states,

"مَا آتَاكُمُ الرَّسُولُ فَخُذُوهُ وَمَا نَهَاكُمْ عَنْهُ فَانْتَهُوا"

(What the Prophet gives you, take it, and what he prohibits you from, refrain).

For the successful implementation of divine ordinances, it is crucial for Muslim women to valiantly combat any local obstacle or cultural barrier. For them, the ultimate value lies in adhering to the guidance set out by the Qur'an and emulating how the women companions of the Prophet upheld these teachings. The primary source of guidance is the Qur'an, followed by all those Hadiths that affirm the fundamental guidelines of the Qur'an.

The views of jurists, who out of caution and to curb the decline of Muslim society deemed it necessary to isolate women and relieve them of certain responsibilities – even barring their entry from mosques – should be recognized as personal interpretations. These interpretations might have been relevant for a specific environment and time, but they aren't granted timelessness. Any qualified jurist or theologian can provide guidance for a specific era, but this guidance is restricted by their finite understanding of religion. To persistently regard this understanding as relevant and authentic for future and altered circumstances is neither acceptable nor practical.

For us, what is relevant is what has been elaborated in the Holy Qur'an and how the Prophetic Sunnah has endorsed it. As for the

juristic and theological views of qualified scholars from different eras, the corpus of literature they produced is our treasure from which we can glean insights. But their ordinances, verdicts or decrees aren't meant to be universally implemented for all time.

When the Book of Allah is with us, it is unworthy to seek guidance from any other source. Extending the conversation further, it is essential to understand that Islam regards the faith of a believer, whether man or woman, as an individual choice. Like a Muslim man, a Muslim woman too attests to her relationship with Allah and Prophet Muhammad, further declaring that she is prepared for any sacrifice in this path.

Thus, a Muslim woman's faith is her own individual act. It bears no relation to her husband, brother or father. She is individually accountable for her actions, receiving reward or punishment on her own accord. The virtuous deeds of men are not sufficient for her salvation.

In the Islamic movement, the role of a woman is not marginalized; like a man, she has a crucial role to play. The Qur'an unambiguously states that the movement of Islam will not be possible without the participation of women. It is imperative that the Muslim society in its entirety stands up to the infidels. Men and women are not from different worlds but are integral parts of a grand movement, empathetic allies and consolers of one another.

The Qur'an beautifully illustrates this point,

"وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتُ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ يَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَيُطِيعُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ أُولَئِكَ سَيَرْحَمُهُمُ اللَّهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ * وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا وَمَسْكِنٌ طَيِّبٌ فِي جَنَّاتٍ عَدْنٍ وَرِضْوَانٌ مِّنَ اللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ ذَلِكَ هُوَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ"

(Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so, and the men who remember

Allah often and the women who do so - for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward. [9:71-72]).

As illuminated by the Qur'an, men and women collectively striving for the religion of Allah are integral components of a sacred mission. This joint endeavour results in them being co-heirs of His mercy. For the dominance of Islam, towards which faithful men and women individually strive, the role assigned to women is in no way inferior to that of men.

In the nascent days of Islam, hardly any battle took place where Muslim women, according to their abilities and capacities, didn't match men in their cooperation and support. This support manifested in various forms – sometimes as financial assistance, at other times as poetry and praise, and on numerous occasions, through physical assembly and exhortation.

The wives of Prophet Muhammad and other women companions are often portrayed in historical texts as supplying food and water to soldiers, and nursing their injuries. Yet, the direct participation of women in battles has either been forgotten or excluded by our historians. The reasons for this omission will be explored later on.

Our main objective is to highlight that within an Islamic movement, women too have a foundational role. Similar to how a husband's faith is not sufficient for his wife's salvation or a brother's devotion cannot secure his sister's spiritual safety, the reward for participating in the Islamic movement is individually received by each woman. It is essential for every individual, irrespective of their gender, to participate to be considered part of the movement for the dominance of Islam. The Quran clearly states,

" فَاسْتَجَابَ لَهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ أَنِّي لَا أَضِيعُ عَمَلٍ عَمِلَ مِنْكُمْ مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ ۖ بَعْضُكُمْ مِّنَ بَعْضٍ ۚ قَالُوا لَئِنْ هَاجَرُوا وَآخَرُجُوا مِن دِيَارِهِمْ وَأُودُوا فِي سَبِيلِي وَقَتِلُوا لَأُكَفِّرَنَّ عَنْهُمْ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ وَلَأُدْخِلَنَّهُمْ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ ثَوَابًا مِّنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ ۖ وَاللَّهُ عِنْدَهُ حُسْنُ الثَّوَابِ. [3:195]

And this translates to, "And their Lord has heard them (and He says): Lo! I suffer not the work of any worker, male or female, to be lost. You proceed one from another. So those who fled and were driven forth from their homes and suffered damage for My cause,

and fought and were slain, verily I shall remit their evil deeds from them and verily I shall bring them into Gardens underneath which rivers flow - A reward from Allah. And with Allah is the fairest of rewards." [3:195].

The path of Allah, which encompasses leaving one's homeland, experiencing humiliation, engaging in battle, and even facing martyrdom, is not exclusive to men. These trials, tribulations, and struggles are shared equally by women; hence, before Allah, a believer's status corresponds to the degree of struggle they have endured, regardless of their gender. Both men and women are equally entitled to reward, and it is expected of both to choose the path of Allah to become recipients of immense blessings and rewards.

As the Quran expresses in Arabic,

"مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَنُحْيِيَنَّهٗ حَيَاةً طَيِّبَةً وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ." [16:97]

"Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while he is a believer - We will surely cause him to live a good life, and We will surely give them their reward [in the Hereafter] according to the best of what they used to do." [16:97].

The Qur'an offers clear guidance, stating that in the path of Allah, both women and men are called to leave their homes, face the oppression of enemies, and must be prepared to give and risk their lives. It is implausible then to suggest that a woman could achieve salvation in the afterlife without participating in and choosing this path. How can modern Islamic movements persuade believing women to relinquish their role and engagement in this revolutionary Islamic movement that qualifies them for the beautiful rewards promised by Allah? To do so would be in clear contradiction of Qur'anic injunctions that assert salvation is not determined by sectarian, racial, or gender affiliations, but by individual actions and conduct.

The verse "وَكُلُّهُمْ آتِيهِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ فَرْدًا" [19:95], translates to, "Every one of them will come to Him singly on the Day of Judgment." [19:95]. Isn't it then crucial for a conscious Muslim woman to prepare for that day now, especially considering the Day of Judgment is described as,

"وَمِنْ أُمِّهِ وَأَبِيهِ وَصَاحِبَتِهِ وَبَنِيهِ. لِكُلِّ امْرِئٍ مِّنْهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ شَأْنٌ يُغْنِيهِ" [80:35-37],

which translates to, "And from his mother and his father, and from his wife and his children. Each one of them, that day, will have enough concern (of his own) to make him indifferent to the others." [80:35-37].

Reflect upon this: the Qur'an places emphasis on individual deeds for salvation, promising eternal rewards for those who endure tribulations on the path of Allah. In this context, no gender-based distinction is made. Yet, a disquieting perception persists within contemporary Muslim societies: the notion, often held irrespective of one's gender, educational background, or ideological leaning, that women have no substantial role in the pursuit of peace and justice. A pervasive belief suggests that women carry no obligation or role in challenging and overturning the misleading systems of our age. Women's sphere of influence, many argue, is confined to the home, divorced from the broader public sphere. The time is ripe to question these assumptions and restore the balance that has been disrupted.

Over the centuries, this belief has gradually solidified into societal norms, often deterring fresh perspectives or critical examination of the issue. Despite the march of time, the predicament of the Ummah remains severe. Even as we nurture a fervent desire to see the resurgence of Islam's ascendancy, the grip of long-standing traditions often chokes our yearning to revitalise our flagging Muslim society anchored in Islamic principles. Consequently, our society clings, somewhat fearfully, to each vestige of its decline. There is a palpable apprehension that the powerful gusts of Western cultural influence might soon shake the very foundations of our Muslim society. It's high time to engage with this fear and reassess our position.

Our defensive reflex has become so formidable that our traditional scholars have denied women even those rights that Islam itself has conferred. A survey of traditional literature reveals chapters bearing such titles as "The Orders for Prohibition of Women Entering Mosques", notwithstanding the clear Hadith of Prophet Muhammad,

"لا تمنعوا إماء الله مساجد الله" — "Do not prevent the female servants of Allah from (going to) Allah's mosques." Such instances lay bare how deeply certain misconceptions have taken root, obscuring the true teachings of Islam. It's an urgent call for us to reconsider and reexamine our established beliefs.

In our view, to repel the advance of Western cultural influences and the perceived loose morality they represent, superficial measures are insufficient, and the conventional mindset of the Muslim world, grounded solely on its basic principles, lacks the vitality necessary to resist this intrusion. Precisely because of these conditions, despite the disapproval from religious scholars and their emphasis on preserving traditional norms, our society continues to splinter with each passing day. It's a state of affairs that invites reflection and reform.

One could amass a list of rules intended to confine Muslim women within the domestic realm, but the undeniable reality is that, with quiet determination, the average woman is striving to define her role in the world. Find a sphere of life where Muslim women are absent! We cannot ignore the fact that as she grapples with shaping her role, a Muslim woman is far more likely to gravitate towards a Western model than an Islamic one. Frequently, her traditional bonds with Muslim society have either significantly diminished, if not been entirely broken. This is a situation that demands our attention and thoughtful engagement.

Even though religious scholars invest substantial effort in protecting culture and traditional norms, seeking to validate them in the name of Sharia and imbuing them with divine sanctity in a vain attempt to preserve a delicate status quo, the tapestry of Muslim society continues to fray. These endeavours lack the resilience to withstand the unyielding winds of change, a situation that cries out for reimagining our approaches and assumptions.

In the span of the last seven decades of political oppression, no self-styled cultural institution has remained untouched. Attempts to keep women within their homes were countered by their emergence into public life; fierce opposition to women's education met with the

year-on-year increasing presence of women in modern educational institutions. Barriers were erected against their participation in socio-political institutions, yet a significant number of Muslim women joined these bodies, rendering the opposition ineffective. This narrative calls for a re-evaluation of our practices and prejudices.

Ponder over the paradox where one might deem it inappropriate for their daughter to study in a co-educational medical institute, yet when their health is at stake, they would seek out a Muslim woman doctor. Similarly, the profession of a lawyer might be considered forbidden (haram) for a woman, yet when it involves the 'protection' of Shariah law, during the public meetings of the Muslim Law Board, the input of experienced Muslim women lawyers is viewed as essential. These contradictions shed light on the deeply ingrained and often convoluted cultural attitudes prevalent in our society.

A striking dichotomy pervades between the espoused beliefs and the real-world actions. If the Ummah had truly acted upon such 'Islamic advice,' today, we would see neither Muslim women lawyers defending Shariah in courts, nor Muslim women doctors tending to the health needs of the women of the Ummah. Such discrepancies lay bare the urgent need for a deeper, more honest reflection on our societal practices and norms.

Should your goal be truly altruistic, aiming to stem the tide of cultural encroachment, then old-guard strategies no longer prove effective. With the transformative force of Islam within your grasp, a force potent enough to face and triumph over any civilizational or cultural challenge, why persist in a defensive skirmish?

If your interpretation of Islam crumbles before the manufactured winds of the West and the deceptive roars of the East; if your women seek greater comfort in Western systems than Islamic ones; and if your wronged daughters search for justice in 'unlawful' courts rather than Shariah courts, then the moment has come to acknowledge that you have deviated from the Islam that once uplifted women to such an extent that the companions of the Prophet felt women had gained

unprecedented independence following Islam's rise, to the point they no longer needed male guardianship.

During that epoch, a woman's personal autonomy and her entitlements were so staunchly upheld that her gender posed no hurdle to her accomplishments in both the temporal and spiritual realms. The pressing need of the hour is to awaken every soul to its ordained role in the Islamic movement, as commanded by Allah and His Prophet. The mere act of designating conventional norms as 'Islamic' neither benefits Islam nor constitutes an effective bulwark against Western incursions.

In both the modern movements aimed at awakening Muslim consciousness and within the more retrogressive Muslim societies, there appears a marked absence of pragmatic discourse around women's roles. Even among those who seek reform within the parameters of Islam, the Islamic role of women tends to be occluded by traditionalist readings. It is indeed a striking oversight that we have allowed to lapse the recollections of an Ummah where women thrived as scholars, where they were esteemed as preachers and pedagogues. Their counsel was solicited in policymaking, they offered invaluable reinforcement during conflicts, and their attendance was a mainstay at important socio-political gatherings, from the final sermon of Prophet Muhammad to the congregational prayers on Fridays and Eids.

Yet today, such an Ummah appears to have either been forgotten or intentionally neglected. Even within our female religious circles, there seems to be a dearth of the conviction that it is not solely men's responsibility to rescue the current Muslim Ummah from its predicaments and reinstate the lost glory of Islam - the duty is just as much women's. In the pursuit of establishing Islam's dominance, devout women must once again join their male counterparts, shoulder to shoulder, in this noble cause.

For a truly transformative revolution to take root, it is imperative that we clear away the misconceptions surrounding women, misconceptions which have been handed down through traditional

narratives, often acquiring an undeserved sanctity. It's crucial that we shed light on the true role of women within Islam, not only recounting their contributions from the past, but also reaffirming their indispensable role in the ongoing progress and fortification of the Ummah.

Women and Work

Defining Boundaries in Islam

A deep-rooted misunderstanding frequently encountered revolves around the purportedly sanctioned sphere of women's activities. The dominant view encloses women within the household's four walls, declaring anything beyond as the territory of men. It postulates that a woman relinquishes her femininity if she dares trespass into this realm. However, before we dissect this premise and explore its congruence with the Qur'anic teachings, there is a critical issue that requires our attention.

It's imperative to comprehend that men and women are shaped by God with inherent biological distinctions. The role of procreation and childbirth has been exclusively bestowed upon women, a responsibility that cannot be delegated elsewhere. This charge is of such profound significance, bearing extensive implications, that it naturally bestows upon women certain dispensations from other obligations.

For instance, she is not obliged to earn a living. During her monthly cycles, her prayer obligations are reduced, and even in the context of jihad, her participation is considered voluntary, as Prophet Muhammad said: "The jihad of women is performing hajj."

Indeed, the weight of procreation and the nurturing of offspring represent such a monumental task that fairness would decree no further burdens be thrust upon her. Yet, this acknowledgment does not

preclude her from stepping beyond the home's parameters. Instead, it simply recognizes the singular role she upholds in the dance of life and the perpetuation of society.

Certainly, while procreation is a critical responsibility and role for a woman, it doesn't encapsulate her entire existence. To draw a parallel, the principal role of a farmer is to cultivate crops, a teacher to educate, and a doctor to heal patients. Yet, these roles don't confine their lives in their entirety. Outside these primary professions, they can assume a host of other roles and identities within society.

Likewise, the purview of a woman within an Islamic society reaches beyond the domain of procreation. Women are vital contributors to their communities. In periods of adversity, when the Islamic movement encounters tribulations, the onus of pioneering new strategies and embracing fresh roles is a shared responsibility, resting equally on the shoulders of both women and men.

When enemy forces threaten Muslim borders, or when the united strength of Muslims wanes, no professional, be they a technocrat, doctor, or other, can ignore these events under the pretext that it is outside the scope of their primary duties or profession. They cannot dismiss involvement in the Muslim movement as merely an exceptional task necessitated by an emergency. As part of their everyday life, Islam expects from every believer that, in addition to their professional responsibilities, they serve as advocates and ambassadors for their faith.

Undeniably, a woman's primary domain is within the home, and the procreation of generations is her fundamental responsibility, given the unique capabilities nature has bestowed upon her as a mother. However, if anyone insists that a woman's role in society ends with the fulfilment of this basic responsibility, they demonstrate a profound misunderstanding of Islam. They effectively deny the vibrant culture and civilization that emerged during the era of the Prophet, forged jointly by men and women.

The relevant verses from Surah Al-Ahzab (33:28-34) are:

"يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلْ لِّزَوَاجِكَ إِن كُنْتُمْ تُرِيدْنَ الْحَيَاةَ الدُّنْيَا وَزِينَتَهَا فَتَعَالَيْنَ أُمَتِّعْكُنَّ وَأُسَرِّحْكُنَّ سَرَاحًا جَمِيلًا. وَإِن كُنْتُمْ تُرِيدْنَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَالذَّارَ الْآخِرَةَ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ أَعَدَّ لِلْمُحْسِنَاتِ مِنْكُنَّ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا. يَا نِسَاءَ النَّبِيِّ مَن يَأْتِ مِنْكُنَّ بِفَاحِشَةٍ مُّبِينَةٍ يُضَاعَفْ لَهَا الْعَذَابُ ضِعْفَيْنِ وَكَانَ ذَلِكَ عَلَى اللَّهِ يَسِيرًا. وَمَن يَفْعَلْ مِنْكُنَّ لِلَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَتَعْمَلْ صَالِحًا نُفُوزًا أَجْرَهَا مَرَّتَيْنِ وَأَعْتَدْنَا لَهَا رِزْقًا كَرِيمًا. يَا نِسَاءَ النَّبِيِّ لَسْتُنَّ كَأَحَدٍ مِّنَ النِّسَاءِ إِنِ اتَّقَيْتُنَّ فَلَا تَخْضَعْنَ بِالْقَوْلِ فَيَطْمَعَ الَّذِي فِي قَلْبِهِ مَرَضٌ وَقُلْنَ قَوْلًا مَّعْرُوفًا. وَقرْنِ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ وَلَا تَبَرَّجْنَ تَبَرُّجَ الْجَاهِلِيَّةِ الْأُولَى وَأَقِمْنَ الصَّلَاةَ وَآتِينَ الزَّكَاةَ وَأَطِعْنَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا وَادْكُرْنَ مَا يُتْلَى فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ مِنْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَالْحِكْمَةِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ لَطِيفًا خَبِيرًا".

The translation of these verses is as follows:

"O Prophet, say to your wives: 'If you desire the life of this world and its luxuries, then come, I will provide for your enjoyment and release you with a fair severance. But if you seek Allah and His Messenger and the home of the Hereafter, then surely, Allah has prepared for the virtuous among you an immense reward.' O wives of the Prophet, any of you who commits a manifestly indecent act, her punishment will be doubled. That is easy for Allah. But whoever among you devoutly obeys Allah and His Messenger and does good, We will grant her double the reward, and We have prepared for her a noble sustenance.

O wives of the Prophet, you are not like any other women. If you fear Allah, then do not be too complaisant in your speech, lest he in whose heart is a disease should be moved with desire. Speak honourably. Stay in your homes and do not flaunt your beauty as in the days of pre-Islamic ignorance. Establish the prayer, pay the Zakah, and obey Allah and His Messenger. Allah wishes only to remove any uncleanness from you, O People of the House, and to purify you thoroughly. And remember the revelations and wisdom that are recited in your homes. Indeed, Allah is ever Gentle, All-Aware."

These verses address the Prophet's wives, laying down guidelines for their conduct and the special responsibilities they carry due to their association with the Prophet. The instructions for them to stay in their homes should not be taken out of context; they are specifically directed to the Prophet's wives and are connected to the need for them to

uphold high standards of modesty and purity. It does not limit the sphere of activities for women in general but rather emphasizes on their role in upholding religious and moral standards in society.

An astute reader of the Qur'an, or anyone familiar with Arabic literature, can easily discern that these verses from Surah Al-Ahzab specifically address the Prophet's wives. They are being made aware of the considerable responsibility they carry as the wives of the Prophet. Declared as the "mothers of believers" at the beginning of this Surah, it's only natural to expect exceptional piety and virtuous conduct from these esteemed women, given they are not like other women.

They are repeatedly reminded of their unique status - a status that raises the stakes of their actions, as any mistakes would yield double the punishment, and good deeds would earn double the rewards. The honour of being the Prophet's wife is a privilege that no other woman can claim. This unique status, however, also brings with it increased restrictions compared to ordinary women, primarily because Allah seeks to cleanse the Prophet's family from any form of corruption.

The Prophet's wives, due to their distinct position, are deserving of special honour and respect in Islamic society, serving as the only spiritual family with leadership status. Consequently, it is recommended for them to reside with dignity within their homes - these are not ordinary residences but blessed spaces where the Prophet imparts understanding of the Qur'anic verses. Their role is to utilize their exalted status to propagate the verses and comprehension of Islam.

For those aiming to position common women under the same restrictions and limit their mobility, it is pertinent that they first ensure a divine decree of double rewards for these ordinary women, mirroring the assurance given by Allah to the Prophet's wives. If these verses from the Surah Al-Ahzab do not specifically pertain to the wives of the Prophet, outlining their stringent guidelines, then why does the subsequent verse explicitly lay out distinct instructions for ordinary women?

This verse reads as follows: "O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused." (Al-Ahzab, 33:59)

أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلْ لِّزَوَاجِكَ وَبَنَاتِكَ وَنِسَاءِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ يُدْنِينَ عَلَيْهِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ أَدْنَىٰ أَنْ يُعْرَفْنَ
فَلَا يُؤْذَيْنَ ۚ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا

This verse in itself attests that the previous ones were intended specifically for the wives of the Prophet, thus delineating the different expectations for them compared to ordinary Muslim women. This serves as further evidence that generalizing the restrictions applicable to the Prophet's wives to all Muslim women would be an oversimplification of the divine directives.

It is critical to note that the verses specifically addressing the wives of the Prophet do outline strenuous standards of living. Initially, the verses appeal to the Prophet's wives to remain at home, while subsequent verses addressing Muslim women in general stress not on home-stay but on the decorum of venturing out. This attests to the recognized mobility of women in Islamic society and outlines the distinctiveness of this society from that of the infidel, ignorant ones. It is not the display of a woman's beauty on the roadside that characterizes her, but rather the sanctity and respect enveloping her personality with the adornment of a jilbab (veil).

If the distinctions between the standards set for the Prophet's wives and ordinary Muslim women were not meant to exist, then why would Allah address only the wives of the Prophet in one instance, and in another, instruct the Prophet to differentiate between his wives, daughters, and ordinary women?

If some still persist in believing that the directive to stay home applies not just to the Prophet's wives but to all Muslim women, they should present robust evidence to substantiate such a claim. This is because the Quranic evidence points clearly towards a distinction in the responsibilities and guidelines for the Prophet's wives and for Muslim women in general.

*Awrah*¹ and the Veil

Decoding Women's Modesty in Islam

Those proponents arguing for the seclusion of women within their homes often construe the entirety of a woman's being as 'Awrah'—a term denoting that which must be shrouded by clothing. They visualize a woman as a figure that must be enshrouded within protective layers that extend beyond those body parts not fundamentally required to be concealed, such as the face and hands. In its most extreme interpretations, even the mere resonance of a veiled woman's voice can incite disapproval from those embracing this viewpoint.

Advocates of this perspective seldom furnish evidence from the Qur'an or Sunnah to buttress their assertions, instead drawing upon self-invented doctrines to rationalize these constraints. They perceive a woman's liberty of movement as a potential wellspring of discord and, unabashedly, champion the idea of depriving women of their dynamic roles in society. This mentality, however, is discordant with the principles and teachings of Islam, which have invariably championed the dignity, respect, and active societal participation of women.

¹ The intimate parts of human body that need to be covered by clothing according to Islam.

The Qur'an explicitly permits—even for the Prophet's wives—to engage in discourse with non-mahram men (those they could theoretically marry under Islamic law), provided they observe the appropriate hijab. In the era of the Prophet, his wives served as crucial founts of religious knowledge. The Prophet's companions sought their counsel on matters of faith, reaping substantial benefits from their wisdom.

Following the Prophet's passing, an intellect and beauty like Syeda Ayesha continued to command reverence as an esteemed teacher for an extended period. Even her fiercest adversaries lacked the temerity to mute her by labeling her voice as *fitnah* (social discord) or striving to curb her societal influence. Her influence and societal role underscore the active engagement and importance of women in the Islamic community, a stark contrast to the misinterpreted belief advocating their absolute seclusion.

When Caliph Umar attempted to set a particular amount as a bridal gift, *Mahr*, a woman's voice echoed from a corner of the mosque in protest. She quoted the Qur'anic verse:

وَإِنْ أَرَدْتُمْ اسْتِبْدَالَ زَوْجٍ مَّكَانَ زَوْجٍ وَآتَيْتُمْ إِخْدَاهُنَّ قِنطَارًا فَلَا تَأْخُذُوا مِنْهُ شَيْئًا ۚ أَتَأْخُذُونَهُ بُهْتَانًا وَإِنَّمَا مُبِينًا [4:20]

"But if you intend to replace a wife by another and you have given one of them a heap of gold, then take not from it anything. Would you take it by false claim and manifest sin?" [4:20].

No one in the assembly of men objected to a woman voicing her rights. Instead, her evidence was accepted as valid, and Caliph Umar discarded his view, stating, "A woman got it right, and Umar was wrong."

Similarly, when a dispute emerged between Caliph Abu Bakr and Lady Fatima over the Fadak orchard, it's reported that Fatima presented a comprehensive speech in support of her right to the orchard. This led to a heated exchange between the two, further indicating that women's voices were heard and considered in these significant matters.

During the period of turbulence following the martyrdom of Caliph Othman, the entire ummah was fraught with conflict over the matter of Caliphate. This struggle culminated in the battles of Siffin and Camel. Despite such tumultuous times, there were no laws enacted to suppress the voices of women, and their influence continued to shape the political landscape.

Consider, for instance, the Battle of the Camel, where leadership was entirely in the hands of Syeda Ayesha. Even in this turbulent epoch, no companion of the Prophet voiced an objection to Syeda Ayesha's conspicuous public and political role. They found themselves in a quandary, split between pledging their allegiance to Syeda Ayesha or Ali. Had mere womanhood sufficed as a disqualifier for a political role, a sizeable contingent of the Prophet's companions would not have rallied behind her. This fact attests to the reality that women too held considerable roles in political and public spheres during that era.

In the annals of Islamic history, there is no evidence of Sharia law excluding women's voices from socio-political institutions. A salient example of this is the women of Imam Hussain's household, who had the opportunity to employ their eloquence and bravery in the court of Yazid. Their every word was laced with criticisms and mockeries of that authoritarian regime. Even that system, known for its oppressive tactics against dissenters, did not seek to silence women's voices on the pretext that they were a source of discord.

If Allah and His Prophet did not suppress the voices of women out of fear of tribulation, then who granted us the authority to declare women's voices as sinful and unlawful for the opposite sex?

If, even after the clear guidance provided by the Qur'an and Sunnah, someone continues to deem women's voices as sources of mischief and therefore unlawful, using citations from the Hanafi or Shafi'i schools of thought to justify their stance, the fitting response would be to quote from Surah At-Tawba: "They take their priests and

their anchorites to be their lords in derogation of Allah" [9:31, Arabic: *يَتَّخِذُونَ أَحْبَارَهُمْ وَرُهَيْبَةًهُمْ أَرْبَابًا مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ*].

Such a mentality bears no relation to Islam. It's crucial to recognize that Islam encourages participation and expression from both genders, guided by the compass of respect and propriety.

Men have a degree above...

*"Divorced women shall wait concerning themselves for three monthly periods. Nor is it lawful for them to hide what Allah has created in their wombs, if they have faith in Allah and the Last Day. And their husbands have the better right to take them back in that period, if they wish for reconciliation. And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them. And Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise..." (Al-Qur'an, 2:228, Arabic: **وَالْمُطَلَّقَاتُ يَتَرَبَّصْنَ بِأَنفُسِهِنَّ ثَلَاثَةَ قُرُوءٍ وَلَا يَحِلُّ لَهُنَّ أَنْ يَكْتُمْنَ مَا خَلَقَ اللَّهُ فِي أَرْحَامِهِنَّ إِنْ كُنَّ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ** وَبُعُوهُنَّ أَحَقُّ بِرَدِّهِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ إِنْ أَرَادُوا إِصْلَاحًا وَلَهُنَّ أَرْحَامُهُنَّ عَلَى مِثْلِ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِنَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَلِلرِّجَالِ عَلَيْهِنَّ دَرَجَةٌ ۗ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ (مثلُ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِنَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ) (Al-Qur'an, 2: 228)*

The advent of Islam heralded significant transformation, particularly for the enslaved and women, who were now recognized as fully-fledged and equal citizens. The religion's new yardstick for social ranking was piety, effectively overturning the established order based on slavery or free status, and gender. The act of freeing a slave was lauded as a highly meritorious deed, and raising two or three daughters would qualify one for paradise. Islam brought significant opportunities for emancipation for women and the enslaved alike.

This socio-spiritual revolution manifested itself continually in Medina. Girls, whose birth had previously been lamented, now found

themselves valued as equal participants in the sacred prophetic mission. Women were acknowledged as citizens with independent perspectives and wisdom, and their advice and consultations became integral to decision-making processes. The Prophet's practice even suggested that women could sometimes provide superior counsel and advice compared to men.

During the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, a surprising turn of events arose when the Muslim pilgrims hesitated to carry out the Prophet's orders, even those closest to him displayed an unexpected lack of discipline. In the midst of this dilemma, the Prophet sought refuge in the tent of his wife, Umm Salma. Visibly aggrieved and disturbed by his companions' reluctance to follow his instructions, it was Umm Salma who offered advice that diffused the tension. This episode served as a testament to the role of women as counsellors and advisors, showcasing the strength of their wisdom, counsel, and reasoning.

However, as time passed, the Muslim society started to wane from the Prophetic ideals. The revolutionary Islamic agenda started losing emphasis and the Ummah's moral standards declined. Amidst this regression, a cautionary and protective mentality took precedence. The political landscape, too, had retrogressed from the ideals of the Prophet to the concept of monarchy. Those concerned with the preservation of Islam focused on safeguarding the remnants of its social, spiritual, and educational life. The number of individuals capable of standing up to the authoritarian system dwindled.

After the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, internecine battles, and the subsequent death of Imam Zainul Abideen and Umar ibn Abdul Aziz, many felt that the Ummah's salvation lay in shunning violence and focusing their energy on non-political fields. With the increasing sway of the 'protectionist mentality', women were gradually pushed away from roles where the Prophet had initially granted them space. Instead of addressing the root causes of the moral decline, some sought to remove women from social life under the guise of 'protection', arguing that their absence would reduce the likelihood of mischief.

An intriguing example of this mindset can be found in the circumambulation of the Ka'ba. It is said that Muhammad bin Hisham, the governor of Makkah, upon observing the circumambulation, felt that the mingling of men and women increased chances of mischief. Consequently, he devised a plan to modify the rules to ensure men and women remained separate during the ritual.

However, Ata, a renowned Hadith scholar of his time, staunchly opposed this scheme. He argued that if the Prophet Muhammad's wives participated in mixed circumambulation, how could women now be barred from jointly circumambulating with men?

Today, if some people still hesitate to acknowledge women in significant socio-political roles, it's not solely due to the fear of mischief within Muslim society. Instead, it's because they are cognizant of the fact that in a non-Muslim society, numerous sources of potential mischief already exist. These individuals are aware that various channels of mischief, such as television, the internet, and other means of telecommunication, have permeated even our private spaces, including our drawing rooms.

Many objections to the active societal role of Muslim women often stem from misconceptions and biases. One widely held misconception suggests that women are intellectually inferior to men, which supposedly makes them unsuitable for strategic responsibilities or delicate issues. This idea promotes a belief in male superiority, often citing the Qur'anic verse "wa lil-rijāli 'alayhinna darajah" (وللرجال علمین (درجة), which is frequently quoted out of context.

Similarly, some individuals, to generalize women as deceitful, cite the verse "Inna kaydakunna 'aẓeem" (إِنَّ كَيْدَكُنَّ عَظِيمٌ). This verse, however, was revealed about the wife of Aziz of Egypt, not all women.

The actual context of "wa lil-rijāli 'alayhinna darajah" comes from the full verse in Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:228. It states:

"Divorced women shall wait for three monthly periods. And it is not lawful for them to conceal what Allah has created in their wombs, if they believe in Allah and the Last Day. And their husbands have the

better right to take them back during this period if they desire reconciliation. Women have rights similar to those against them in a just manner, but men have a degree over them. Allah is Mighty and Wise."

The original Arabic verse is:

"وَالْمُطَلَّقَاتُ يَتَرَبَّصْنَ بِأَنْفُسِهِنَّ ثَلَاثَةَ قُرُوءٍ، وَلَا يَحِلُّ لَهُنَّ أَنْ يَكْتُمْنَ مَا خَلَقَ اللَّهُ فِي أَرْحَامِهِنَّ إِنْ كُنَّ يُؤْمِنَنَّ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ، وَيُعْلِفْنَ أَحَقُّ بِرَدِّهِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ إِنْ أَرَادُوا إِصْلَاحًا وَلَهُنَّ مِثْلُ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ، وَلِلرِّجَالِ عَلَيْهِنَّ دَرَجَةٌ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ."

When interpreted accurately and in context, these verses can help to address the misconceptions that exist about the role and capabilities of women in society.

Indeed, there is a specific context in which men are accorded a degree of responsibility or "superiority" over women according to Islamic teachings. The verse from Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:228, refers to this aspect within the context of marital dissolution. The nature of divorce and post-divorce proceedings, as described in the Islamic jurisprudence, are intricate and mindful of the emotional and social complexities inherent in male-female relations.

When a marriage dissolves, men can consider remarrying immediately, whereas women are required to observe a waiting period or 'iddah of three menstrual cycles. This waiting period is significant both for determining whether a woman is pregnant and for allowing time for emotional healing and reconciliation. In this specific context, men are placed in a position that could be seen as more advantageous as they can initiate reconciliation during the waiting period if they deem it possible and beneficial.

Although men and women have equal rights in Islam, and no gender is superior to the other, the responsibilities and roles assigned during a divorce differ. The process of initiating divorce primarily rests with the man, giving him a certain "degree" of responsibility. In contrast, if a woman seeks to terminate the marriage, she must pursue a legal process known as 'khula'.

Thus, the term "superiority" in the verse does not refer to an inherent or general superiority of men over women but rather to the specific role and responsibilities accorded to men in the context of marital dissolution. It is crucial to understand these nuances to prevent misinterpretation and misuse of the scripture.

It is fundamentally crucial to refrain from quoting verses out of context, and to avoid making sweeping generalizations when interpreting the Quran. The verse from Surah Al-Baqarah (2:228):

"وَلِلرِّجَالِ عَلَىٰ نِسَائِهِمْ دَرَجَةٌ ۚ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ"

translates as: "but men have a degree over them. And Allah is Mighty, Wise."

This verse specifically provides guidance for marital relations and procedures during divorce, and should not be construed as a declaration of men's inherent or universal superiority over women across all facets of life.

Such a misguided interpretation would stand in contradiction to the broader teachings of the Quran, which promote principles of equality and justice. The Quran firmly asserts that merit is determined not by one's race, nationality, sex, or gender, but by individual actions and personal righteousness. This sentiment is emphasized in Surah An-Nisa (4:32):

"وَلَا تَتَمَنَّوْا مَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بِهِ بَعْضَكُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ ۚ لِلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا اكْتَسَبُوا وَلِلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا اكْتَسَبْنَ"

which translates to: "And do not wish for that by which Allah has made some of you exceed others. For men is a share of what they have earned, and for women is a share of what they have earned..."

This verse underscores the notion that both men and women are rewarded according to their individual deeds and not based on their gender. Hence, when approaching the Quran, one must consider its context and embrace its overarching principles of justice, equality, and respect for all people.

Indeed, the notion that men are universally superior to women contradicts many historical and contemporary examples of devout and

righteous women who have been revered for their piety, wisdom, and leadership. Even in the Islamic tradition, women like Aseya and Maryam (may Allah be pleased with them) are held in the highest esteem for their exemplary faith and moral courage.

In fact, the Quran itself attests to the spiritual status of Maryam, the mother of Jesus (peace be upon him), in Surah Al-Tahrim (66:12):
 "وَمَرْيَمَ ابْنَتَ عِمْرَانَ الَّتِي أَحْصَنَتْ فَرْجَهَا فَنَفَخْنَا فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِنَا وَصَدَّقَتْ بِكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّهَا وَكُتِبَ
 وَكَانَتْ مِنَ الْقَانِتِينَ"

This verse translates to: "And Mary, the daughter of 'Imran, who guarded her chastity; and We breathed into (her body) of Our spirit; and she testified to the truth of the words of her Lord and of His Revelations, and was one of the devout (servants)."

In the historical context of the Islamic tradition, when forces led by Ali and Ayesha (may Allah be pleased with them) were in conflict, nobody dared to claim that Ali was superior to Ayesha purely based on his gender. This historical event further exemplifies that the measure of an individual's worth in Islam is not predicated upon their gender but their deeds, wisdom, and piety.

Thus, the belief that men are universally superior to women not only contradicts the teachings of the Quran but also defies historical precedence and contemporary realities. Superiority in Islam is ultimately determined by one's righteousness, actions, and dedication to the principles of justice and equality.

Absolutely, it is essential to understand that the Quran champions the concept of spiritual and moral equality among genders. The faith introduces us to revered women like Aseya, the wife of Pharaoh, and Maryam, the mother of Jesus, as ideal examples for all believers, irrespective of their gender.

This is illustrated in Surah Al-Tahrim (66:11-12) as follows:

"وَضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا امْرَأَتَ فِرْعَوْنَ إِذْ قَالَتْ رَبِّ ابْنِ لِي عِنْدَكَ بَيْتًا فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَنَجِّنِي مِنْ فِرْعَوْنَ وَعَمَلِهِ وَنَجِّنِي مِنَ الْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ. وَمَرْيَمَ ابْنَتَ عِمْرَانَ الَّتِي أَحْصَنَتْ فَرْجَهَا فَنَفَخْنَا فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِنَا وَصَدَّقَتْ بِكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّهَا وَكُتِبَ وَكَانَتْ مِنَ الْقَانِتِينَ".

Which translates to: "And Allah presents an example of those who believed: the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, 'My Lord, build for me near You a house in Paradise and save me from Pharaoh and his deeds and save me from the wrongdoing people.' And [the example of] Mary, the daughter of 'Imran, who guarded her chastity, so We blew into [her garment] through Our angel, and she believed in the words of her Lord and His scriptures and was of the devoutly obedient."

Hence, these verses debunk the misguided notion that women are intrinsically spiritually or socially inferior simply because they are women. Instead, they affirm that women, like men, can reach lofty spiritual heights and serve as moral compasses for all believers. The teachings of the Quran fundamentally undermine the idea of inherent inferiority or superiority based solely on gender.

Absolutely, it is essential to note that in the Quran, the devout and pious Muslim women are not merely figures to be revered, they are also exemplars to be emulated by both men and women. This is underscored in the Arabic verse "لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا" (lillazeena aamanu) which translates to "for those who believe". The phrase does not specify a gender, and hence encompasses all believers, both men and women.

The Quran is thus clear in its message: if believers, irrespective of their gender, aspire to strengthen their faith and yearn for closeness to Allah and a place in Paradise, they should take inspiration from the exemplary lives of virtuous women like Aseya and Maryam.

Indeed, if being a man was inherently superior or sufficient for spiritual elevation, there would be no need for the Quran to extol the virtues of these pious women and set them forth as models to be emulated in the pursuit of divine proximity. It is therefore erroneous to interpret any Quranic verse as implying an inherent or universal superiority of one gender over the other in all aspects of life.

And from it created its mate...

Mankind, fear your Lord, who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women; and fear God by whom you demand one of another, and the wombs; surely God ever watches over you
(Al-Qur'an, 4: 1)

There exist certain belief systems that unjustifiably promote women as inherently lesser than men in their creation, drawing from interpretations of Jewish and Christian traditions that state woman was created from the rib of man. From such a perspective, a being that owes its existence to a fragment of another cannot assert equality. There also prevails the viewpoint that women, when juxtaposed with men, are deficient in their entirety. Some, leaning on tenuous traditions, pronounce women as deficient in intellect and faith.

To accept these theories unconditionally, without scrutinizing them through the lens of the Qur'an—the bedrock of Islamic thought—would be a hasty judgement.

Every facet of creation, women included, is perfect in its own way, devoid of any inherent flaws or deficiencies. When it comes to humans,

the Qur'an pronounces them as the most noble among all creations. Reflect on this verse from Surah At-Tin (The Fig), "Indeed, We have created humankind in the finest of moulds." (95:4, Arabic text: لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا ۖ (الْإِنْسَانَ فِي أَحْسَنِ تَقْوِيمٍ). To relegate women from this 'finest of moulds' or to disparage them by presuming intellectual deficiency contradicts the spirit of the Qur'an.

Ponder on the following verse: "O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from a single soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women." (An-Nisa, 4:1, Arabic text: يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا ۖ (رَجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً).

This verse underscores the shared lineage of men and women, promoting mutual respect between the sexes. It reminds us that both men and women originated from a single soul, highlighting the shared rights they possess. Both sexes are inherently equal, each possessing unique strengths and roles that contribute indispensably to the progress of society. The notion of one sex being superior to the other stands in stark contradiction to the essence of Islam, which champions equality, justice, and mutual respect.

The Qur'an provides limited details regarding the first human couple, which implies that these specifics may not be central to the broader interpretation of the Qur'anic worldview. The text mentions that all men and women were created from a single 'soul' or 'nafs' (Arabic: نَفْسٍ) and that its 'mate' or 'zauj' (Arabic: زَوْجَهَا) was created from the same soul.

The term 'nafs', while linguistically feminine in Arabic, is used in a more expansive sense to refer to the 'soul' or 'self' of a person, irrespective of gender. The same applies to the term 'zauj', which is linguistically masculine, but is used extensively in the Qur'an to refer to a spouse or mate, again without specific gender implication.

The essence of these verses is that all humans, whether men or women, were created from a single 'soul'. They share the same essence and substance in their creation. This fundamental unity and equality is

a core part of the Islamic understanding of human nature and relationships.

Indeed, geographical and topographical variations have no bearing on the inherent unity of human beings, as all have sprung from the same soul. This verse places emphasis on two fundamental aspects: firstly, the fear of God, which acts as a moral compass guiding our actions, and secondly, the recognition of the tremendous creative capacity of the womb, a distinct aspect of femininity.

This recognition in the Qur'an does not underscore any inferiority of women, but rather, it pays tribute to the remarkable ability women possess in the realm of creation. This serves as a potent reminder that while we demand our mutual rights, we must not lose sight of the reality that our very existence in this universe is intimately tied to the nurturing love and motherly qualities of women.

Indeed, the Quranic perspective diverges from the Biblical account in regard to the creation of woman and man. In the Quranic worldview, women and men are equal in their essence and status. Women are not considered as subsidiary or secondary to men in any aspect of life.

Furthermore, the Quran refutes the Biblical narrative in which the woman is blamed solely for the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. According to this narrative, it might be inferred that women have a natural vulnerability to succumb to temptations and can easily be misled. However, the Quran provides a contrasting account, attributing equal responsibility to both man and woman for their eviction from the Garden. This emphasizes the fundamental Quranic principle of personal accountability, regardless of gender.

In essence, the Quran liberates women from the blame attributed to them in the Biblical account, reinforcing the principle of gender equality and mutual responsibility in the sight of God. It underscores that both men and women have the same spiritual worth and moral responsibility, thus, breaking away from the gender biases rooted in many traditional narratives.

"But Satan whispered to him; he said, 'O Adam, shall I direct you to the tree of eternity and possession that will not deteriorate?' So they both ate of it, and their private parts became apparent to them, and they began to fasten over themselves from the leaves of Paradise. And Adam disobeyed his Lord and erred."

فَوَسْوَسَ إِلَيْهِ الشَّيْطَانُ قَالَ يَا آدَمُ هَلْ أَدُلُّكَ عَلَى شَجَرَةِ الْخُلْدِ وَمُلْكٍ لَّا يَبْلَىٰ فَأَكَلَا مِنْهَا فَبَدَتْ لَهُمَا فُؤُوسُهُمَا وَطَفِقَا يَخْصِفَانِ عَلَيْهِمَا مِن وَرَقِ الْجَنَّةِ وَعَصَىٰ آدَمُ رَبَّهُ فَغَوَىٰ [20:120-121]

This verse underlines that it was both Adam and Eve who succumbed to the whisperings of Satan, highlighting the Quran's stance on mutual responsibility, irrespective of gender. It is important to note that the Quran places an equal emphasis on the moral and spiritual accountability of both men and women. It doesn't attribute the original sin to Eve alone, as in some other religious texts, which in turn underscores the inherent equality of men and women in the eyes of God.

Fulfilling the Duty

Men as Protectors in Islam

"Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore, the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in [the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (Next), refuse to share their beds, (And last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them Means (of annoyance): For Allah is Most High, great (above you all)" (Al-Qur'an, 4: 34)

Those who regard women as an inferior creation to men often argue that men should manage their affairs in order to protect this so-called weaker being from harm in both this world and the next. They often cite verse 4:34 from Surah An-Nisa to justify their stance:

"الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ؛
فَالصَّالِحَاتُ قَانِتَاتٌ حَافِظَاتٌ لِّلْغَيْبِ بِمَا حَفِظَ اللَّهُ..."

This translates to: "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore, the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard."

However, this interpretation misconstrues the essence of the verse. It is not a sweeping declaration of men's superiority over women. Instead, it outlines specific contexts in which men are regarded as 'qawwam' (protectors or maintainers) over women: namely, that some men have been favoured with more strength than women, and that men spend their wealth on women. In the familial unit—the core of society—a man's status as a 'qawwam' stems from his role as the provider and his responsibility to meet the family's financial needs.

This Quranic verse does not imply a blanket statement of men's superiority, but outlines a role of responsibility within a specific societal and familial context. The term 'qawwam' denotes a functional role rather than inherent superiority. The mention of men's 'superiority' in this verse refers to different roles and responsibilities within a certain socio-cultural context, not to a measure of worth or intellect. It is crucial to remember that the Quran champions balance and mutual respect between genders, and no interpretation should contradict this fundamental principle.

The core of justice lies in acknowledging that women bear the profound responsibility of procreation, a role that naturally exempts them from certain economic pursuits. In an Islamic society, men are considered 'qawwam' due to their responsibility to provide for their families. However, this role does not indicate any inherent physical, intellectual, or spiritual superiority over women.

Being a 'qawwam' involves two fundamental requirements. The first one is related to being a male, which is a natural attribute. The second one, however, is conditioned on fulfilling economic responsibilities towards the family. If a man, for any reason, fails to fulfil these responsibilities or shirks them, his role as a 'qawwam' is jeopardized. This demonstrates that the status of 'qawwam' is not a given, but rather a position that must be earned and maintained through responsible actions.

It is important to reiterate that the Quran does not ascribe a general superiority to one gender over the other. Each gender has its unique roles and responsibilities, and both are esteemed for their individual contributions to society. The interpretation of these verses should always be grounded in the Quran's overarching principles of equality, justice, and mutual respect.

Certain individuals interpret the verse *فَالصَّالِحَاتُ قَانِتَاتٌ* as "Muslim women are obedient to their husbands," using it as a means to assert male superiority. However, this is a misinterpretation; the term 'qanitaat' when used elsewhere in the Quran refers to obedience to Allah, not to husbands.

In addition, the belief that this verse indicates universal male superiority is flawed. Does it imply that all men globally are superior to all women? If not, then who holds superiority over whom? The verse's context is primarily a familial one, not a universal declaration of gender roles. It emphasizes that not all men are superior, but only those who fulfil certain criteria related to their economic capabilities.

This verse does not comment on men's physical strength, intellectual prowess, or spiritual superiority. It only highlights men's economic roles and responsibilities within a family structure. Because of their roles as providers, their views are crucial in familial matters. This heightened status, bestowed due to their economic responsibilities, is considered a mercy from Allah.

However, it is important to note that this status does not make men infallible or confer upon them absolute authority. While they may have a guiding role within the family, this doesn't entitle them to demand complete obedience from women, or to control women's spiritual, religious, or intellectual development.

Women maintain their individual status and identity. They are responsible for their life, their actions, and their spiritual growth, both in this world and the hereafter. Women also play a critical role in

creating a righteous society, and no man, regardless of his status, can assist or hinder them in fulfilling this responsibility. As emphasized in the hadith of Prophet Muhammad, "لا طاعة لمخلوق في معصية الخالق" - "There is no obedience to the creation in disobedience to the Creator." Therefore, no man has the right to shirk his commitment to the pre-eminence of Islam or hinder a woman from participating in the same commitment.

Women at the Helm

Navigating Islamic Statecraft

In an Islamic society, both men and women are integral and equal members of the Ummah. Just like men, women played a crucial role in the Prophetic mission, actively contributing to the evolution and triumph of the Islamic movement and the establishment of the Islamic justice system. At each stage of the Islamic movement's development, women stood at the forefront, undertaking sacrifices comparable to those of men, in terms of offering their wealth, accepting exile from their homeland, enduring martyrdom, or engaging in battle in the path of Allah.

Consequently, when an Islamic state comes into existence, it would be unthinkable to sideline or detach women from its governance. They, after all, have staked their lives and wealth for its establishment and, therefore, have a significant stake in its future. If Islam does not regard women as spiritually or intellectually inferior to men, there should be no obstacle to women's active involvement in statecraft.

Indeed, during the era of the first generation of Muslims, women's advice was sought on important policy matters, and their opinions were taken into account when selecting the Caliph. For instance, after the death of Caliph Umar, when the selection between contenders Uthman and Ali reached a deadlock, Abdul Rahman ibn Auf solicited the perspectives of key figures, women included, to make a decisive resolution (as recorded in *Al-Bidayah wa'an-Nihayah*). Furthermore,

when women made strategic decisions in their individual capacity, these decisions were respected and implemented by the Islamic state.

A notable tradition relates to Umm Hani bint Abu Talib, who sought the Prophet's intervention when her brother, Ali, intended to kill a person she had given refuge to. The Prophet responded: "O Umm Hani! We too grant refuge to whom you have already promised protection."

An even more illustrative example of women's participation in statecraft comes from Aisha, who led the Battle of the Camel during a turbulent period and strived to steer the affairs of the state in a positive direction. This demonstrates that Muslim women cannot be passive observers in matters of governance.

Following the martyrdom of Caliph Othman, there was a pervasive sense that the foundations of the Islamic state were in jeopardy. The machinery of the state was shattered, rebels ran rampant, and anarchy reigned. Conditions were so dire that even the stalwart Ali was reluctant to assume the responsibility of the caliphate.

When the atmosphere of chaos subsided, it was clear that even the caliph was powerless before the rebels. Aisha was presented with a choice: to either witness the dissolution of the Islamic state or stand up for its reform. She chose the latter, appealing to Muslims to participate in her reform movement.

However, the outcome of the Battle of the Camel was discouraging. Despite significant bloodshed, the desired goals remained elusive. In the aftermath of the battle, a prevailing sentiment emerged among Muslims: no battle could be won under a woman's command. This belief, coupled with the prevailing sentiment against rebellion, essentially served to maintain the status quo, even at the cost of bloodshed.

Despite concerted efforts by the first generation of Muslims, the caliphate could not be re-established along Prophetic lines. Even the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and his family could not upend the monarchy. A consensus emerged among Muslims that it was preferable to avoid bloodshed and to attempt to implement Islam in other areas

of life, even if it meant tolerating authoritarian rulers. Gradually, this philosophy became the accepted norm, and a large number of ulama today subscribe to it.

Aisha's unsuccessful attempt to lead added fuel to the negative attitudes towards women's leadership. A hadith was later circulated stating, "A nation will not prosper if they entrust their affairs to a woman" (لَنْ يُفْلِحَ قَوْمٌ وَلَوْ أَمَرَهُمْ امْرَأَةٌ). This saying gained traction after Aisha's defeat in the Battle of the Camel. There was no reason for an Ummah, for whom the word of Allah and His Prophet were supreme and binding, to adopt such a compromising stance. The entire paradigm shifted from the time when the Qur'an was raised as the decisive factor in the Battle of the Camel. In that context, if this hadith had been known to people before the battle, it's likely that none would have rallied in support of Aisha. Similarly, it would have been impossible for Aisha herself to lead an Islamic army if such a hadith had been prevalent.

In a faith like Islam, where principles of non-discrimination based on sex, color, or race are clearly emphasized, and where piety is underscored as the only true measure of worth, could it be conceivable for its Prophet to disqualify a wise Muslim woman from leadership solely due to her gender? Is it factual to assert that no nation can find salvation under the leadership of a woman? Let's delve into what the Quran elucidates on this matter.

The Quran presents the story of the Queen of Sheba, a female ruler, whose reign didn't lead to the downfall of her nation. Instead, her wisdom and pragmatism not only guided her path but also steered her entire nation towards righteousness. The Quran underscores that the decision to renounce the worship of false gods and acknowledge the worship of the one true God was entirely her own. Observe the steadfastness of the queen in her pursuit of truth and the salvation of the afterlife as delineated in these verses:

﴿قَالَتْ يَا أَيُّهَا الْمَلَأُ إِنِّي أُلْقِيَ إِلَيَّ كِتَابٌ كَرِيمٌ. إِنَّهُ مِنْ سُلَيْمَانَ وَإِنَّهُ بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ.

أَلَا تَعْلَمُونَ عَلَيَّ وَأَتُونِي مُسْلِمِينَ. قَالَتْ يَا أَيُّهَا الْمَلَأُ أَفْتُونِي فِي أَمْرِي مَا كُنْتُ قَاطِعَةً أَمْرًا حَتَّى تَشْهَدُون. قَالُوا نَحْنُ أَوْلُو قُوَّةٍ وَأُولُو بَأْسٍ شَدِيدٍ وَالْأَمْرُ إِلَيْكِ فَانْظُرِي مَاذَا تَأْمُرِينَ. قَالَتْ إِنَّ الْمُلُوكَ إِذَا دَخَلُوا قَرْيَةً أَفْسَدُوهَا وَجَعَلُوا أَعِزَّةَ أَهْلِهَا أَذِلَّةً وَكَذَلِكَ يَفْعَلُونَ. وَإِنِّي مُرْسِلَةٌ إِلَيْهِمْ بِهَدِيَّةٍ فَنَاظِرَةٌ بِمَ يَرْجِعُ

الْمُرْسَلُونَ ﴿[27:29-35]

The Queen declared, "O chiefs, a noble letter has been delivered to me. It is from Solomon, and it reads: 'In the name of Allah, the most gracious, the most merciful. Do not exalt yourselves above me, but come to me in submission.' She said, 'O chiefs, advise me in this matter. I will not decide on anything without your counsel.' They responded, 'We are endowed with power and great military might, but the decision is yours, so consider what you will command.' She noted, 'When kings enter a city, they ruin it and humiliate its nobility. I will send him a gift and see what my envoys bring back in response'" (Quran 27:29-35).

There came a point when she proclaimed: "O Lord, I have wronged my soul, and I now submit with Solomon to Allah, the Lord of all the Worlds" (Quran 27:44).

ثُمَّ كَشَفْنَا عَنْ سَاءَهَا فَإِذَا هِيَ قَائِمَةٌ تُنْظِرُ إِلَى السَّحْرِ قَالَتْ رَبِّ إِنِّي ظَلَمْتُ نَفْسِي
وَأَسْلَمْتُ مَعَ سُلَيْمَانَ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

The story showcases the Queen's quest for truth as a defining aspect. Upon receiving Solomon's message to embrace faith, she responds not with the arrogance of power or with the intent to exert her strength, as advised by her courtiers, but with the humility and curiosity of a truth-seeker. She embarks on a journey of discovery, sending her emissary with gifts to discern the authenticity of Solomon's prophethood and the mercy of monotheism, rather than interpreting it as a ploy for territorial annexation.

When the validity of Solomon's prophethood and the grace of monotheistic God become evident to her, she embraces the faith without hesitation. She feels no compulsion to return home and deliberate with her courtiers. She single-handedly transitions from sun worship to belief in one God, and from a path of ignorance to a path of salvation. In this journey, she needs no aid or companionship.

Her solo voyage not only brings her individual enlightenment but also leads her entire nation towards salvation. This profound transformation showcases the wisdom and capability inherent in her leadership, reiterating that the salvation of a nation under a female leader is not just plausible but is also demonstrably possible, as revealed in the Quran.

The salvation of a nation does not hinge on whether its affairs are under the control of a man or a woman. Instead, it's primarily influenced by the leader's acceptance of truth, God-consciousness, wisdom, and pragmatism. If these qualities are present in a woman, she could be likened to the Queen of Sheba, whose wisdom and pragmatism serve as an inspiring model for future generations.

On the other hand, a male ruler devoid of these qualities could turn into an Abraha, whose story serves as a cautionary tale for future generations. Abraha's stubbornness and false arrogance not only led to his downfall but also brought disaster upon his entire nation. Thus, the defining factors for the successful leadership and subsequent salvation of a nation lie in qualities that transcend gender.

Beyond Domesticity

The Social Role of Women in Islam

An Islamic society is a forward-looking ideological community where everyone, regardless of gender or age, strives to fulfil the elevated role of being vicegerents on Earth. In such a society, men and women equally participate in the safeguarding and development of their community. Hence, it is inconceivable that women could be entirely excluded from public life.

Indeed, women in Islamic society are as active as men, their public roles shaped by the guidelines Islam imposes. Obeying the rules of hijab, women can excel in all aspects of life. Islam not only grants women property rights but also the freedom to manage and increase their wealth through trade or skills.

The Prophetic era provides us with examples of women renowned for their business acumen, including Umm bani Anmar at the forefront. Back then, it was not frowned upon for a woman to leave her home to engage in commerce. An instance recounted by Abu Yasir and reported by Tirmidhi tells of a woman coming to make a purchase from him. Moreover, Caliph Umar even appointed Shifa bint Abdullah as a market inspector.

A clear depiction of how a woman participated in outdoor tasks traditionally performed by men is found in the example of Asma binti Abu Bakr, as chronicled in Bukhari. This account validates that Muslim women were active in public life during the Prophetic era.

Asma's participation in her husband Zubair's work is detailed through her own narration. She would carry a basket of flowers from the land Prophet had granted Zubair, a parcel situated roughly three kilometres from her home. One day, as she returned with the basket on her head, she encountered the Prophet accompanied by many of his Medinian companions (Ansar). The Prophet offered her a seat behind him on his camel, but she, feeling shy in the male-dominated group, declined. Recognizing her modesty, the Prophet continued his journey without her. Upon telling Zubair about the incident and her refusal of the Prophet's offer due to her shyness, it is evident that the participation of women in public life was recognized and respected.

Islam neither advocates for strict segregation of men and women nor does it permit unrestricted interaction between them. The faith doesn't condone confining women within their homes, nor does it approve of women partaking in public activities that contravene Allah's laws, such as drinking and dancing. In Islamic society, men and women do interact outside their homes, in public gatherings or on public thoroughfares. When a woman is in distress in a public setting, and a man steps forward to assist her, it should not be frowned upon by the 'pious.'

This concept is eloquently illustrated in the Qur'an, in the interaction between the daughters of Jacob and the Prophet Moses:

﴿وَلَمَّا وَرَدَ مَاءَ مَدْيَنَ وَجَدَ عَلَيْهِ أُمَّةٌ مِّنَ النَّاسِ يَسْقُونَ وَوَجَدَ مِنْ دُونِهِمُ امْرَأَتَيْنِ تَذُودَانِ﴾

قَالَ مَا خَطْبُكُمَا قَالَتَا لَا نَسْقِي حَتَّى يُصْدِرَ الرِّعَاءُ وَأَبُونَا شَيْخٌ كَبِيرٌ ﴿[28:23]

"And when he came to the water of Madyan, he found there a group of men watering [their flocks], and aside from them two women holding back [their flocks]. He said, 'What is your concern?' They said, 'We do not water until the shepherds dispatch [their flocks]; and our father is an elderly man.'" [28:23].

Here, the Qur'an narrates a scene at a watering place in Madyan. Moses comes upon a group of men watering their flocks, and apart from them, two women refraining from watering theirs. Upon inquiring about their situation, they explain that they cannot water their flocks until the shepherds have finished, and that their father is

an elderly man. This incident is a testament to the fact that men and women in Islamic society can interact appropriately in public spaces when necessity dictates.

The mosque serves as the lifeline for the social fabric of Muslims, its doors equally welcoming to both women and men. Although women are generally excused from obligatory congregational prayers, excluding them from the socio-political sphere of the mosque contradicts the Prophetic command: 'لَا تَمْنَعُوا إِمَاءَ اللَّهِ مَسَاجِدَ اللَّهِ', 'Do not prevent the female servants of Allah from the mosques of Allah' (Sahih Bukhari).

In one account relayed by Imam Muslim through Abdullah ibn Umar, when Abdullah's son voiced his intention to stop a woman from his household attending mosque at night—despite having heard the above hadith—Abdullah ibn Umar expressed profound displeasure. He challenged, 'The Prophet has made his stance clear, yet you dare withhold permission?'

The Islamic law allows for a woman's presence in mosques, irrespective of the time of day or the prevailing conditions, be they of peace or uncertainty. When Islam extends a warm welcome to women at its sanctified sites, such as the Ka'ba and the Prophet's mosque—where the presence of women during the Hajj is a common sight—it raises a pertinent question: How could we justify barring her participation in everyday social life?

During the Prophetic era, it was a rare occurrence to find a public gathering devoid of women. The Prophet, on Eid occasions, emphasized that all women, whether elderly, pregnant, or menstruating, should join the Eid congregation. Even those menstruating, who could not partake in prayers, were still encouraged to partake in the gathering. As stated in Bukhari, 'Every woman, old or young, pregnant or menstruating, should participate in the Eid congregation without fail and benefit from the blessings of Islam. But women having periods should not participate in the prayers.' This illustrates a clear representation of women's inclusivity in the spiritual and social life of Islam.

Congregations at the Prophet's mosque were marked by the active involvement of both men and women. A meticulous study of Hadith literature reveals that women weren't just passive observers; they actively engaged in debates, question-answer sessions, and deliberations. On one occasion, while the Prophet was delivering a sermon, a woman questioned the reason behind the majority of women being destined for hell (Sahih Muslim).

An interesting incident related by Abu Hurairah underscores the active participation of women in these congregations. Following the conclusion of prayers, the Prophet addressed the gathering, instructing everyone to be seated. He posed a question to the assembly: "أَيُّكُمْ يَجْلِسُ" - "Who among you lies with his wife and then goes and tells others about it?" All men remained silent. He then turned to the women, asking the same. A young woman, in response, stood up, leaning forward so that the Prophet could see her and take her words seriously. She stated: "وَاللَّهِ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ الْبَيَّسَاءُ يَفْعَلْنَهُ وَالرِّجَالُ يَفْعَلُونَهُ" - "Indeed, by Allah, O Messenger of Allah, women do it, and men do it." The Prophet responded: "أَتَدْرِينَ مَا مَثَلُ ذَلِكَ؟ مَثَلُ ذَلِكَ مَثَلُ الشَّيْطَانِ لَقِيَ الشَّيْطَانَةَ فِي" - "Do you know what the comparison of that is? It's like a male devil meeting a female devil on the street and having intercourse with her in front of the people" (Musnad Ahmad and Sunan Abu Dawood). This incident illustrates the openness of discussion within Islamic congregations, as well as the active participation and valued input of women.

"When the gatherings became too crowded, making it challenging for women to hear the Prophet distinctly and receive answers to questions that could not be addressed in mixed gatherings due to the constraints of modesty, the women requested an exclusive audience with the Prophet. In response to this appeal, a specific day was set aside for them," (Sahih al-Bukhari). This demonstrates the Prophet's understanding of and accommodation for the unique needs of women in his community, further exemplifying the integral role of women in Islamic society.

Valiant Veils

Women in the battlefield

In the context of an established Islamic society that functions as an Islamic state, women aren't explicitly obliged to partake in battles, especially when the Muslim army is engaged in advancing Islam to remote regions. As Muslim men adeptly carry out this duty, women find themselves exempt from direct participation in the battlefield. However, if a woman opts to be involved, it is her discretionary choice.

In periods of significant decline in the Muslim community, when the entangled webs of deceit and falsehood continue to persist, despite the strenuous efforts of Muslim men, the Quran expects women, akin to men, to be willing to sacrifice their lives and wealth in the path of righteousness.

The Quran provides a solemn promise in Al-Imran [3:195]:

وَاسْتَجَابَ لَهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ أَنِّي لَا أُضِيعُ عَمَلَ عَامِلٍ مِّنكُم مِّن ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أَنكُرِيَنَّكُمْ مِّن بَعْضِ الَّذِينَ هَاجَرُوا وَأُخْرِجُوا مِن دِيَارِهِمْ وَأُودُوا فِي سَبِيلِي وَقَاتَلُوا وَقُتِلُوا لَأُكَفِّرَنَّ عَنْهُمْ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ وَلَأُدْخِلَنَّهُمْ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ ثَوَابًا مِّن عِندِ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ عِنْدَهُ حُسْنُ الثَّوَابِ

This translates to: "Their Lord heard them and answered them: 'Never will I cause to be lost the work of any of you, whether male or female; you are members of one another. So those who emigrated or were evicted from their homes, or were harmed in My cause, or fought or were killed—I will surely cover their bad deeds, and I will surely admit them into gardens beneath which rivers flow, as a reward from Allah. With Allah is the best reward.'"

This verse underscores the Quran's recognition of the equal efforts of men and women, offering a divine guarantee of rewards for their selfless acts during times of adversity.

The period during which this Qur'anic verse was revealed was a critical one, marking the progression of the Muslim community towards the establishment of a solid reformatory system. The Battles of Badr and Uhud were pivotal moments in the survival and growth of the community. Given the disparity in strength and resources between the Muslims and their adversaries, it was essential to harness every ounce of available power within the community in these decisive encounters.

Hence, during these times of consolidation, and prior to the conquest of Makkah, women were actively engaged in battles. However, once the Islamic state was established and the forces of disbelief subdued, instances of women participating in combat became less common.

In the wars of the Prophetic era, women were undeniably enthusiastic participants. They mostly served in a paramilitary capacity, offering support and supplies to the fighters. Nonetheless, when the tide of battle threatened to turn against the Muslims, they would step up to engage directly in the fighting.

Bukhari has documented an instance from Anas where, during the chaos of the Battle of Uhud, he observed Sayyida Aisha and Umm Saleem carrying water bags on their backs to quench the thirst of the wounded. The Battle of Uhud held immense importance in the Muslims' journey following their victory at Badr. It was meticulously planned to optimally utilize the community's resources, which perhaps accounts for the more prominent involvement of women in Uhud compared to other battles.

The courage of Nusaiba bint Kaab in the Battle of Uhud has been well-documented by various historians. Initially joining the battle to provide water to the injured, she later found herself drawn into the heart of the conflict as the fate of Islam hung in the balance. Nusaiba wreaked havoc among the enemy ranks, instilling fear and terror. As

the Battle of Uhud reached a perilous turning point, with even Prophet Muhammad surrounded by foes, Nusaiba stepped up to defend the Prophet. Her extraordinary bravery earned the commendation of the Prophet himself and has been recorded in *Tabaqat*.

The annals of hadith also celebrate numerous women who served as members of the Muslim army's medical aid team. Among these was Laila Alghaffaria, a woman who had been specifically authorized by the Prophet due to her expertise in treating the injured and caring for the sick, as recorded in *al-Isaba*. According to Bukhari, her primary duties were to supply water to the thirsty, tend to the wounded, and transport the bodies of the martyrs back to Medina.

Another woman recognized for her involvement in the medical aid team at Uhud was Hamna bint Jahash. The women of the Prophetic era did not perceive themselves as weak or helpless, nor did they labour under the misconception that men were solely responsible for their protection in times of extreme fear. When they recognized that their lives, as well as those of their children, were in jeopardy, they took necessary actions.

The Battle of the Trench presented a unique set of challenges. The enemy's army was massive, and the battlefield was vast. It was impractical for the Muslims to dedicate a group of men to protect the women in forts, so this duty was assigned to Hassan bin Thaabit. Under the assumption that the enemy was oblivious to the real situation inside the fort, the Muslims did not anticipate an attack. However, when a Jew tried to infiltrate the fort through a wall, Safiya bint Abdullah, comprehending the danger, took swift action and killed him, despite risking her own life in the process, as recorded in *al-Isabah*. Some traditions even suggest that she severed the intruder's head and hurled it outside the fort, creating an illusion that a considerable number of men were stationed inside for defence. This act of valour deterred the enemy, helping to safeguard the fort from an attack.

Women's involvement in historical battles was not limited to defensive roles, nor does it reflect a lack of courage or a contentment

to serve solely in auxiliary forces. On the contrary, numerous instances exist where women, akin to men, took up arms and actively participated in jihad.

Umm al-Zuhak bint Masood is one such example, documented as having taken part in the Battle of Khyber. The Prophet acknowledged her courage and contribution, awarding her a portion of the war booty, similar to her male counterparts. Nusaiba bint Kaab, renowned for her participation in the Battle of Uhud, also joined the Battle of Yamaama, a conflict during which she lost her son Abdullah, and herself sustained a severe injury, leading to the loss of one of her arms, as recorded in *al-Isaba*.

Historical records also highlight Umm Saleem bint Malhan's bravery during the Battle of Hunain, where she wielded a dagger. It's widely known that the Prophet gave her glad tidings, promising that she would be among the men who embarked on journeys across the seas for the sake of Allah, as she desired, as narrated in Bukhari. Even while recognizing her gender, the Prophet offered prayers for her protection and success during her involvement in these distant battles.

Hijab: but to what extent?

A common belief prevalent today is that, while the hijab is an Islamic requirement, it's impractical in the context of our modern world. As such, in families where the practice of wearing the hijab has waned and where free mixing of genders is usual, there is no explicit ideological opposition to this shift. The dominant viewpoint suggests that, to keep pace with today's society, the tradition of the hijab might need to be set aside.

This perspective mirrors that of Muslims who perceive it feasible to follow Islam without strictly adhering to its system of regulations. As a result, numerous Muslim women are striving to construct their worldly and spiritual lives without necessarily observing the practice of the hijab. Despite this adjustment, their zeal and passion to uphold Islamic duties such as prayers and mindfulness of the afterlife remain undeterred.

Furthermore, the common understanding of the hijab is often so varied and hostile that it's challenging for an ordinary Muslim woman to discern the true significance and concept that Allah and the Prophet have encapsulated within the hijab. Even those women who have set aside the hijab, finding themselves navigating life far removed from this practice, often suppress the sudden urge to adopt it, thinking that modern perceptions of the hijab wouldn't align with their circumstances. They presume the stringent customs prevalent in our

society in the name of the hijab can't coexist with a dynamic, mobile life.

The cumulative effect is that, as more Muslim women participate in public life, the adoption of the hijab continues to decline. Those Muslims who are practicing or advocating for the hijab can sometimes be victims of extreme perspectives. Conversely, those who have discarded every constraint in pursuit of a material life, unconcerned about divine teachings concerning the hijab, have likewise deviated from the path of truth.

The pressing need is to reintegrate Muslim women into society, crafting an inclusive Muslim society that contrasts with unIslamic systems by providing our Muslim sisters with greater freedom of movement and autonomy within its bounds. This can only be achieved when our society reinstates all those rights to Muslim women that were granted by God and the Prophet but were slowly and inevitably eroded by traditional societies.

The hijab stands as a symbol of liberty for Muslim women. The Jilbab not only imbues her with a sense of protection, but it also affirms that a Muslim woman, while observing the Shariah norms of modesty, can make a positive contribution to Muslim society through active engagement. It's a declaration that Islam affords equal opportunities to both men and women to gain Allah's favour and establish a virtuous environment. This environment upholds the banner of God, promotes good, prohibits evil, and allows each individual to perform according to their abilities. Therefore, certain principles are enshrined in the public and social lives of men and women. This is to ensure that those working tirelessly to create a righteous society do not succumb to human whims and vulnerabilities.

The hijab serves as a beacon of freedom for Muslim women. It is not merely a garment providing her with a sense of security, but it also stands as a testament that a Muslim woman, while adhering to the Shariah principles of modesty, can positively influence Muslim society through active participation. It is an assertive declaration that Islam grants equal opportunities to both genders to earn Allah's favour and

foster an environment of virtue. This environment upholds the divine banner, advocates for the good, discourages the wicked, and empowers every individual to perform to their full potential. To safeguard those who are diligently striving to forge a righteous society from human inconsistencies and weaknesses, specific principles are instilled within the public and social lives of both men and women.

The Quran speaks about the importance of modesty:

"وَقُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَغْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَيَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا ۚ وَلْيَضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرِهِنَّ عَلَىٰ جُيُوبِهِنَّ"

"And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their chastity, and not to reveal their adornments except what normally appears. Let them draw their veils over their chests" (Quran 24:31).

Muslim women are further urged not to flaunt their charm beyond what is naturally apparent, and to modestly cover their chests. They are advised not to strut in a way that reveals their hidden allure. Compared to men, women's mobility is subject to certain guidelines. Additional verses elaborate on how Muslim women can modestly mask their beauty while venturing outdoors. Within the confines of the home, a small head covering, or 'khimar', suffices, but when stepping outside, a larger covering, the 'jilbab', is prescribed.

As to the timing and appropriateness of women leaving their homes, or what tasks are deemed essential versus non-essential, there are no explicit directives. These decisions are left to the individuals, taking into account what activities contribute positively to the establishment of a refined Islamic society and what could potentially tarnish its sanctity. Hence, bearing in mind the fundamental principles of Islam, it is for the Muslim community to arrange its affairs in such a way that Muslim men and women can optimally expend their energies for the benefit of that society.

Expectations and responsibilities of both men and women can adapt to changing needs and demands. For instance, in turbulent times of war, if the strength of men alone is insufficient to safeguard the Muslim community from adversaries, additional responsibilities would naturally befall Muslim women under such circumstances.

The evolving social and political landscapes naturally shape new roles for both men and women. Turbulent times may impose greater responsibilities on women, while during periods of normalcy, the expectations might be less strenuous. Hence, in societal life, the roles of men and women are not rigid or static. There are times when active participation in public life is rewarding for women, and there are instances when their responsibilities within the home take precedence, despite the challenges it may pose to remain within the confines of the household. It's a testament to the adaptability and resilience of women in navigating their responsibilities across varying circumstances.

Islam embodies a practical system of life for every era. Therefore, its ethical values and guidelines on the interaction between men and women should not be viewed as infeasible. If Islam mandates the practice of hijab for Muslim women, it implies that this requirement should be viable in every time and every place. No legal scholar or jurist holds the right or the authority to either soften or intensify the standards of modesty for women beyond the explicit injunctions laid out in the Qur'an. The practice of hijab, like any other Islamic tenet, is subject to the clear directives from the Qur'an and the Hadith, not the whims or interpretations of individuals.

In our perspective, the Quranic concept of the hijab poses no implementation difficulties, neither in the past nor the present. Complications arise when we interpret and explain the Quranic requirements overly cautiously, often extending beyond the essential mandates due to our own perceptions. While doing so, we overlook the fact that exaggeration in religious matters is not commendable. As the Prophet (PBUH) stated in a Hadith recorded in Sunan an-Nasa'i 3057, "Beware of extremism in religion, for it was extremism in religion that destroyed those who came before you" (Arabic: "إِيَّاكُمْ وَالْغُلُوَّ فِي الدِّينِ، فَإِنَّمَا "أَهْلَكَ مَنْ كَانَ قَبْلَكُمْ الْغُلُوَّ فِي الدِّينِ"). We must remember that those who overstep the boundaries set by Allah are the ones who truly transgress.

The Veil in Context

Understanding the Qur'anic Guidelines

In the Qur'an, there are two distinct sets of verses pertaining to the concept of the hijab. One is explicitly meant for the Prophet's wives, while the other addresses Muslim women at large. The injunctions for the Prophet's wives regarding the hijab are particularly stringent. Indeed, the verse where 'hijab' is mentioned, often called 'the verse of the hijab', essentially instructs the Muslim community on the appropriate behaviour when visiting the Prophet's household. This verse guides Muslims to request anything they need from the Prophet's wives from behind a curtain or screen.

Further, it is emphasized that after the Prophet's passing, his widows should not be sought in marriage, as such an act is deemed a serious transgression in the eyes of Allah. The entire verse reads:

"يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَدْخُلُوا بُيُوتَ النَّبِيِّ إِلَّا أَنْ يُؤْذَنَ لَكُمْ إِلَى طَعَامٍ غَيْرِ نَاظِرِينَ إِنَاهُ وَلَكِنْ إِذَا دُعِيتُمْ فَادْخُلُوا فَإِذَا طَعِمْتُمْ فَانْتَشِرُوا وَلَا مُسْتَأْنِسِينَ لِحَدِيثٍ إِنَّ ذَلِكُمْ كَانَ يُؤْذِي النَّبِيَّ فَيَسْتَحْيِي مِنْكُمْ وَاللَّهُ لَا يَسْتَحْيِي مِنَ الْحَقِّ وَإِذَا سَأَلْتُمُوهُنَّ مَتَاعًا فَاسْأَلُوهُنَّ مِنْ وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ ذَلِكُمْ أَطْهَرُ لِقُلُوبِكُمْ وَقُلُوبِهِنَّ وَمَا كَانَ لَكُمْ أَنْ تُؤْذُوا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ وَلَا أَنْ تَنْكِحُوا أَزْوَاجَهُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ أَبَدًا إِنَّ ذَلِكُمْ كَانَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ عَظِيمًا [33:53]"

"O you who have believed, do not enter the houses of the Prophet except when you are permitted for a meal, without awaiting its readiness. But when you are invited, then enter; and when you have eaten, disperse without seeking to remain for conversation. Indeed, that [behaviour] was troubling the Prophet, and he is shy of

The verses outline three pivotal elements. Firstly, it sets the etiquette believers should adhere to when invited to the Prophet's home. Secondly, it defines the correct conduct when needing to ask something from the Prophet's wives. Lastly, it emphasizes the severity of the sin in considering marriage to the Prophet's wives. The Prophet's wives are held to a higher standard than ordinary women, and casual talk is discouraged.

"يَا نِسَاءَ النَّبِيِّ لَسْتُنَّ كَأَحَدٍ مِّنَ النِّسَاءِ إِنَّ اتَّقَيْتُنَّ فَلَا تَخْضَعْنَ بِالْقَوْلِ فَيَطْمَعَ الَّذِي فِي قَلْبِهِ مَرَضٌ وَقُلْنَ قَوْلًا مَّعْرُوفًا. وَفَنِّ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ وَلَا تَبَرَّجْنَ تَبَرُّجَ الْجَاهِلِيَّةِ الْأُولَى وَأَقِمْنَ الصَّلَاةَ وَآتِينَ الزَّكَاةَ وَأَطِعْنَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا. وَاذْكُرْنَ مَا يُتْلَى فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ مِنْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَالْحِكْمَةِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ لَطِيفًا خَبِيرًا [33:32-34]."

Just before these verses, the Qur'an warns the Prophet's wives in verses 33:28-31:

"يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلْ لِّإِزْوَاجِكَ إِن كُنْتُمْ تُرِيدُونَ الْحَيَاةَ الدُّنْيَا فَمَعَآلَيْنِ أُمَتِّعُكُمْ وَأَسْرَحُكُمْ سَرَاحًا جَمِيلًا. وَإِن كُنْتُمْ تُرِيدُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَالذَّارَ الْآخِرَةَ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ أَعَدَّ لِلْمُحْسِنَاتِ مِنْكُمْ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا. يَا نِسَاءَ النَّبِيِّ مَن يَأْتِ مِنْكُم بِفَاحِشَةٍ مُّبِينَةٍ يُضَاعَفْ لَهَا الْعَذَابُ ضِعْفَيْنِ سَوَاءٌ ذَلِكَ عَلَى اللَّهِ يَسِيرًا. وَمَن يَفْعَلْهُ مِنْكُمْ لِّلَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَتَعْمَلْ صَالِحًا نُؤْتَاهَا أَجْرَهَا مَرَّتَيْنِ وَأَعْتَدْنَا لَهَا رِزْقًا كَرِيمًا [33:28-31]."

translating to: "O Prophet, say to your wives, 'If you should desire the worldly life and its adornment, then come, I will provide for you and give you a gracious release. But if you should desire Allah and His Messenger and the home of the Hereafter - then indeed, Allah has prepared for the doers of good among you a great reward.' O wives of the Prophet, whoever of you should commit a clear immorality - for her the punishment would be doubled two-fold, and ever is that, for Allah, easy. And whoever of you devoutly obeys Allah and His Messenger and does righteousness - We will give her reward twice; and We have prepared for her a noble provision."

These verses warn them of the severe consequences should they engage in inappropriate conduct and promise a generous reward for devout and righteous conduct.

It's clear that those promised exceptional rewards, whose virtuous acts yield twice the blessings, would naturally be held to higher standards. These are not just any women, they are part of the Prophet's household, the epicentre of divine revelation and wisdom. They possess a distinguished status unparalleled anywhere else in the world, a status that necessitates their remaining within their homes, reciting verses rich in wisdom and dignity. Allah desires this eminent family, who holds a leadership role, to remain untarnished. This stringent standard is what Allah has set for the Prophet's wives.

It's important to remember that if anyone were to infer from these verses that these supreme standards should be applied in full to ordinary Muslim women, they would also have to ensure the doubled rewards that come with these demanding limitations. These rewards, as indicated in the scripture, are specially reserved for those who fulfil these rigorous criteria, further emphasizing that the standard set for the Prophet's wives is not intended to be a general rule for all Muslim women.

The Surah Ahzab distinctly addresses the wives of the Prophet, and it's quite clear why. Distinctive lifestyles and specific rules are prescribed for them within these verses. Even minor transgressions

could tarnish the Prophet's family's reputation and profoundly harm its sanctity. Thus, if they seek the Hereafter, they must adhere to rigorous discipline. Not only do they earn double rewards, but they also hold the unique position of being 'Mothers of all Believers,' a distinction no one else can claim. As a consequence of this status, no one has the right to even consider marrying them after the Prophet's death.

It is therefore quite unfounded for anyone to extrapolate general norms for all Muslim women from these specific verses addressed to the Prophet's wives. The particular conditions, expectations, and status they held can't be generalized or equally applied to every Muslim woman. Their directives, as laid out in the Quran, were tailored to their specific circumstances and the important role they held within the Islamic community.

Let us now turn to the verses that address common Muslim women:

"O Prophet! Tell your wives and daughters, and the believing women that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when out of doors); that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And Allah is oft forgiving most Merciful" [33:59]. *يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلْ لِّزَوَاجِكَ وَبَنَاتِكَ وَنِسَاءِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ يُدْنِينَ عَلَيْهِنَّ مِنْ جَلَابِيبِهِنَّ*. (ذَلِكَ أَذْنَى أَنْ يُعْرِضْنَ فَلَا يُؤْذِينَ ۖ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا)

The same topic has been further explained in surah an-Nur:

"Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them; And Allah is well acquainted with all that they do and say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husband, their father, their husband's father, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brother or their brother's sons or their sister's sons, or their women or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male attendants free of sexual desires or small children who have no carnal knowledge of

women; And that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments" [24:30-31].

(وَقُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَغْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَيَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا ۖ وَلْيَضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرِهِنَّ عَلَىٰ جُيُوبِهِنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا لِبُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَائِهِنَّ أَوْ أَبْنَائِهِنَّ أَوْ إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنِي إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ نِسَائِهِنَّ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُنَّ أَوِ التَّابِعِينَ غَيْرِ أُولَىٰ الْأَرْثَةِ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ أَوْ الْطِفْلِ ۚ لَمْ يَظْهَرُوا عَلَىٰ عَوْرَتِ الْنِسَاءِ وَلَا يَضْرِبْنَ بِأَرْجُلِهِنَّ لِيُعْلَمَ مَا يُخْفِينَ مِنَ زِينَتِهِنَّ ۚ)

The first two verses lay down the standards for covering up. The rules that can be derived from these verses collectively are as follows:

- i) Muslim women must cover themselves when leaving their homes.
- ii) Both Muslim men and women should lower their gaze and guard their modesty.
- iii) Muslim women are expected to cover their chests.
- iv) Muslim women should not display their beauty and ornaments except what naturally appears and cannot be hidden.
- v) It is necessary for Muslim women to conceal their beauty, except for a few close relations who are exempted.
- vi) It is not permissible for Muslim women to strike their feet in such a way that they become the centre of attention for others.

These fundamental principles must be observed by every Muslim woman. There can be neither an exaggeration nor reduction of these principles. While adhering to these principles and rules, she is free to contribute to Islamic society according to her abilities.

In the Prophetic sayings, wherever jilbab is mentioned, it refers to a veil or coverlet that women use while going out. Bukhari and Muslim have related through Umm Atiya that when the Prophet Muhammad gave women the order to participate in the congregational Eid prayers, they asked: "O Prophet of God, one among us does not possess a coverlet." He replied: "Can't she borrow one from her sister?"

In Arabic, this is reported as:

"يَا نَبِيَّ اللَّهِ، إِنَّا أَحَدُنَا لَيْسَتْ لَهَا جِلْبَابٌ. فَقَالَ: «لَتَجْعَلَ لَهَا صَاحِبَتُهَا مِنْ جِلْبَابِهَا»

Khimar is that small stole or coverlet that is commonly used to cover the head and bosom inside the home. It is mentioned in a hadith

that jilbab and khimar cover one's head and bosom but not the face. Furthermore, the verses do not mention any rule for covering the face.

Those trying to infer from these verses the rule for covering the face translate the verse as: "they should drape themselves with a whole-body cover, including the face." Anyone who is acquainted with even a modicum of Arabic can easily understand that this is an uncalled-for exaggeration. Such a translation does not fit well with the original Arabic, where the word *adna* means "near." Thus Raghīb Asfahani has written in *Mufridaat*:

"دانيت بين الامرین، ادنيت احدهما من الآخر"

Similarly, Ibn Abbas in his exegesis of this verse has stated that the real meaning is that the coverlet should be near the face but not over it or covering it.

As far as the question of the face veil is concerned, this rule is specific to the wives of the Prophet. Bukhari and Muslim both have quoted from Anas: "when during the battle of Khyber, Safiya bint Hai came, the companions conversed amongst themselves, whether Prophet had married her or kept her as a servant? So they said if she is draped in a veil then it is understood that the Prophet has married her and if not then it means she is a servant."

In Arabic, this is reported as:

"لما كان يوم خيبر، وجاءت صفية بنت حيي، فتناجوا أصحاب النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم أنها إما

أن يتزوجها، وإما أن يسترقيقها، فقالوا: إن اختمرت فهي أمه، وإن لم تختمر فهي مملوكة"

Regarding the face, it is the collective view of the ulama that it is not included among the parts that need to be concealed. Imam Abu Hanifa, Imam Malik, and Imam Shafe'i support this view. It is related in authentic sayings of the Prophet that while wearing the loose unstitched dress for performing Hajj or Umrah, covering the face or wearing gloves is not allowed.

Let's analyse the verse on which the entire structure of the face veil is built. Tabari (الطبري), Jassas (الجصاص), Razi (الرازي) and others have narrated a story related to this verse. The crux of the story is that during the period of ignorance, hypocrites used to harass Muslim

women, so to distinguish free women from enslaved women, God ordered them to cover up.

Razi, in an attempt to lend further legitimacy to the interpretation, has stated that it can have two implications. Firstly, the dress will identify them as women of the elite, and their movement will not be obstructed. Secondly, common people will understand that these women are not open to fornication because women who are so cautious in staying away from strange men that they conceal their faces that are not even obligatory must be adhering to exceptionally high moral standards. So no person can expect that such a woman would be ready for fornication. This has been related by Ibn Abi Sabra (ابن أبي صبرة) on the authority of Ibn Kaab Al Qarzi (ابن كعب القرظي). Various historical mistakes are present in this incident that form evidence for its weakness.

Firstly, this tradition does not extend beyond Ibn Kaab Al Qarzi (ابن كعب القرظي) and Qarzi was a Tabi'i (second generation Muslim). This hadith is *mursal* (مرسل - a type of Hadith that has an incomplete chain of narration). Moreover, Ibn Abi Sabrah (ابن أبي صبرة) had a reputation for exaggerating hadiths. While explaining this verse, he is trying to build up an image of virtuous ladies who conceal their faces, while narrating many incidents, all of which are *mursal*. They bear no relation to real facts. This incident also contradicts that aspect of Islamic culture in which, on the level of faith, slave and free women have been treated equally. Otherwise, what kind of Islamic society is it where noble women are protected from bad men by covering their faces, and slave women are left vulnerable to the same men? The scholars of this school of thought have built their arguments based on weak traditions and have odd views about slave women. Consider this oddity, Abu Bakr Jassas (أبو بكر الجصاص) writes in his *Ahkam-ul-Qur'an* (أحكام القرآن): "It is permissible for unmarried men to look at the hair, arms, legs, chest and breasts of a slave woman." One may ask, then what remains to be seen?

Absolutely, in Islam, the core value is that all humans, regardless of their status or gender, are equal in the eyes of Allah. The principle

measure of value is piety and righteousness, as expressed in Surah Al-Hujarat (49:13):

"O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted."

Arabic text:

"يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ"

Any interpretations or practices that are at odds with this fundamental teaching should be critically examined. It is also crucial to understand the specific contexts in which certain rules and practices were instituted, as well as how they should or should not apply to different circumstances or times.

We should interpret the meaning of these verses as they are and as corroborated by the practices of women during the era of the Prophet. As it pertains to the rules of veiling, the essential point derived from these verses is this: it is obligatory for Muslim women, when stepping outside their homes, to wear coverlets. However, they are allowed to leave their hands and faces uncovered. This provision ensures they can carry out their daily tasks without hindrance, a practice that was customary during the time of the Prophet.

Concerning those who excessively insist on the wearing of a face veil, it appears they may be lacking a full understanding of the actual directives. The stark reality is that these individuals often elevate their personal biases and subjective perspectives above the binding directives of veiling as outlined in the Qur'an. Upon examining the interpretations and evidences provided by these scholars, we find that they frequently justify their viewpoints not with references from the Qur'an or Sunnah, but rather by invoking the concept of 'principles of caution'. In accommodating their perspectives, they seem to overlook the fact that God and His Prophet possessed far greater awareness and understanding of practicality and caution. When permission was granted for Muslim women to leave their faces and hands uncovered,

who then are we to extend the parameters set by Allah, under the pretence of mitigating potential mischief?

All schools of thought largely concur that a woman's face is not a private part that must be veiled. According to the Hanafi school of thought, it is permissible for a woman to leave her face and hands uncovered. There exists, however, some divergence among the Malikis on this issue. One segment mandates the covering of hands and face, while others endorse their being left unconcealed. The majority of Shafe'i scholars do not deem the covering of the face as obligatory, but they regard it as a commendable practice. The Hanbali view differentiates between adorned and unadorned faces, as well as exceptionally beautiful women and those of average appearance. Regardless of whether jurists advocate for the face veil or not, there is a consensus that a woman's face is not considered 'Awrah' (private part).

Despite these explanations, some individuals ardently advocate for the face veil, arguing that uncovered faces invite mischief. They view the face as the primary locus of physical attraction. They contend that if the entire body is covered and the face remains exposed, it's akin to securing every minor entrance of a fortress to fend off invaders, while leaving the main gate wide open. For Syed Abul Aal'a Mawdudi, this argument is paramount among the many he presents in support of the face veil. Who will inform them that the door Allah and His Prophet chose not to close, no one has the right to shut?

Islam is characterized by adherence to the divine instruction where if "Allah and His Prophet permit something, it should be embraced, and if they forbid something, then it should be avoided". We certainly lack the authority to implement or amplify any command on our own under the guise of curtailing mischief. If women's faces trigger unhealthy reactions in some psychologically afflicted men, and if such men have difficulties maintaining their faith, then it is their moral and spiritual education that needs addressing. Their deficiencies should not be used as a pretext for imposing prohibitions or restrictions

on women that Shariah has not mandated and which were not part of the Prophetic Islamic society.

Islam does not endorse a society that effaces the individual identity of women. The notion of faceless Muslim women is incompatible with the practices of early Muslim society. In that first era, Muslim women held distinguished positions across various walks of life. They were recognized by their faces, with historic accounts and Hadiths identifying prominent women based on their facial features. Allow me to illustrate with a few examples:

The woman who disputed Caliph Umar's viewpoint on the matter of dowry, while he was delivering his sermon, is identified in historical texts as a flat-nosed woman. Qais bin Abi Haaz recounts seeing Asma bint Umais at Abu Bakr's residence, describing her as a fair-skinned lady with moles on both hands (Tabari). Ibn Saleel notes that when his daughter came to meet her father, Abu Zarr, her cheeks were pinched together; she was attired in a woollen dress, with a few other people present (Tabaqat). Imran bin Husaiyyan narrates an encounter where Fatima visited Prophet Muhammad, her face initially pale, regained its colour following the Prophet's supplication for her (Ibn Jarir, Tahzeeb).

Qabisa bin Jabir reports that they visited Ibn Masood along with an elderly woman from Bani Asad, recognizable by the marks on her forehead, which Ibn Masood found displeasing. Abu Asma Al Rajabi relates that during a visit to Abu Zarr Ghaffari, they noticed one of his wives was black (Ahmad & Ibn Saad). Urwah bin Abdullah says that when he visited Fatima bint Ali bin Abu Talib, he noticed a ring on her fingers (Tabaqat).

These and numerous other instances unequivocally illustrate that during the Prophetic era, it was far from standard practice for Muslim women to cover their faces and hands.

If Muslim societies today were to emulate the freedoms granted to women during the initial era of Islam, allowing them to operate within the boundaries of the prescribed veil, there's no reason why they wouldn't excel in various spheres of life, all the while adhering to the

commands of God and the Prophet. If applying the rules of veiling is practical and feasible, then Muslim women need not resort to practices of a foreign culture.

In the Prophetic era, the veil was a symbol of the liberation bestowed upon women by Islam, a token of emancipation from a previously uncivilized system. Today, however, the veiling of Muslim women is often misconstrued as an erasure of their individuality, an absolute prohibition on their activities, or a confinement to the domestic sphere. The veil, which was once an emblem of female empowerment in the early Muslim era, is now perceived as a symbol of their disenfranchisement.

The task at hand is to restore the veil to its former significance. Veils have never been obsolete, maintaining their relevance and practicality throughout the ages. However, the contemporary interpretation of the veil, as a device for complete concealment, holds relevance only in the context of the feudal societies from which it emerged. It's time we redefine the veil, aligning it with its original intent and the spirit of empowerment it was meant to embody.

The End Goal

Shaping an Ideal Islamic Society

Islam mandates both men and women to contribute towards the establishment of a virtuous society, and it extends the same freedoms to women as it does to men in the pursuit of this noble mission. However, it is also recognized that individuals who strive to establish such an exemplary, peaceful, and righteous society are susceptible to human weaknesses and mistakes.

To sustain such a virtuous society, certain fundamental principles must guide the interactions and cooperation between men and women. Precautionary measures must be implemented to ensure that the rights of neither party are violated. Both men and women are tasked with upholding these principles, preventing any possible openings for transgressions or deviations.

For instance, it is stipulated that a man and a woman, eligible to marry each other, should only meet in the presence of a third person (Bukhari and Muslim). It is strictly prohibited for either gender to witness the other in a state of nudity (Muslim). Additionally, attire that accentuates bodily allure is discouraged, with Prophet Muhammad warning against women who are "clothed yet naked".

Men and women of faith are further instructed to guard their gazes and maintain modesty (surah al-Nur), while Muslim women are encouraged to wear coverlets when outside their homes. In essence, these regulations emphasize that interactions between men and women should not provoke unnatural or unhealthy desires that could potentially overwhelm them. The goal of these provisions is to foster

a balanced, respectful, and virtuous society that respects the dignity and rights of all its members.

The objective of Islam is not to popularize a specific style of veil or to segregate men and women into separate worlds. Rather, its aim is to foster careful and respectful interactions between men and women, ensuring that those committed to creating a virtuous society do not succumb to human fallibilities. The purpose of Islamic directives is not to confine women to their homes, but to build a society free from moral weakness and vice.

In instances where there may be potential for inappropriate conduct or distraction, Islam does prescribe certain precautions. For instance, the Prophet Muhammad advised women not to attend mosques after applying scent, as this could potentially divert attention from prayer and spiritual contemplation.

However, when it comes to the mobility of women and social interactions between men and women, Islam is not restrictive but rather, it promotes such engagement. It encourages men and women working towards the same righteous mission to see each other as allies and partners. This understanding stems from a commitment to uphold respect, modesty, and equality, as these are the bedrocks of a virtuous and just society.

Men and women are indeed encouraged to engage in respectful public interactions, such as greeting each other and inquiring about each other's well-being. Islam makes no distinction between relatives or non-relatives, strangers or acquaintances when it comes to these greetings and exchanges. As recorded by Tirmidhi, Prophet Muhammad himself set an example for this, as he would greet women who were seated in the mosque and would wave to them. This practice underscores the principles of respect, kindness, and community that are inherent to Islamic teachings.

Islam, in its endeavour to establish a virtuous society, emphasizes adherence to guiding principles, without compromising on the mobility and participation of women in social life. The faith acknowledges the varying degrees of sexual inclinations among individuals, yet it doesn't resort to artificial solutions like completely

concealing and confining women out of fear of mischief. Instead, it pinpoints potential dangers and promotes the rectification of these issues.

Islam stresses the mental and spiritual development of both men and women, rather than merely limiting women's societal participation. It encourages an environment where the symbols and outcomes of piety aren't weakened despite the active role of women in society. This was the distinct spirit that prevailed in the society during the Prophetic era, a model that modern interpretations of the faith can look to for guidance.

Redefining Society

A Journey towards Islamic Virtue

In our present time, as the Islamic community grapples with societal dysfunction and the breakdown of its political and social institutions, Muslims find themselves having to live under systems that don't align with Islamic principles. In such circumstances, the proposition to confine women to their homes out of fear and so-called precaution reflects a lack of wisdom and practicality.

We are compelled to question: What is more detrimental? Living in a state of alienation, yet preserving the foundations of our faith, or allowing minor transgressions to disturb us to our core? Our existence is increasingly defined by integration into a non-Islamic system, where we are forced to contravene Allah's laws daily. Our lives have become so deeply entwined with this alien system that it now seems ordinary.

We have lost sight of the truth that our salvation is assured through the path that was shown to us by the Prophet Muhammad. It's disconcerting that we are living our lives, oblivious to the primary tenets of the Prophetic mission. The thought of sacrificing in the path of Allah and attaining martyrdom in the struggle to elevate His religion is hardly contemplated by many of us. Instead, we have allowed our minds and hearts to drift away from the true essence of Islam.

The pressing need of our times is to abandon this ostrich-like approach, burying our heads in the sand, and prepare ourselves to face the greater evils. Otherwise, we run the risk of even the remnants of our faith being obliterated under this regime of falsehood.

As the Muslim community, especially its women, face a profound crisis, it's critical to understand that this isn't due to a rejection of the path of Allah and His Prophet, God forbid. Rather, their distress is rooted in a corrosive culture that has robbed them of the opportunity to take an active role. They are deeply aggrieved that, under the pretext of avoiding harm, Muslim society has curtailed their ability to make proactive contributions in the path of Allah.

Their sorrow is further compounded by the apparent acceptance by their Muslim brethren of a system that contradicts Islamic principles. These men neither participate meaningfully in fostering a virtuous society nor inspire their sisters to join this mission. Tragically, out of profound disillusionment with the status quo, some Muslim women are turning to Western movements. These movements, though offering the allure of liberation, threaten to take away their cultural and religious identity.

In this era of unprecedented and transformative changes, it's incumbent upon self-aware Muslim women to forge a renewed paradigm for living their lives. It's an urgent call to reinstate an active socio-religious role reminiscent of the empowerment women experienced during the Prophetic era.

Beyond Traditions

Discerning True Islamic Principles

[transcript of a Convocation Address delivered by the author at a Muslim seminary for women in Bangalore, 1997]

This isn't my first time visiting a religious educational institution for women. However, what truly delighted me here was your profound desire to spread the message of the True Faith in the world, which I could see reflected in your painting competition. In all honesty, you put me in a challenging position by appointing me as the judge of the event. Although I'm not an expert in the field, I was particularly moved by a painting in which a six or seven-year-old student expressed her yearning for the predominance of Islam in the world. May Allah help us all realize this shared dream sooner rather than later.

It became clear from the speeches delivered by students during the afternoon sessions that your institution is far from being a conventional educational establishment. Your educators demonstrate a profound understanding that they are preparing you for a future Islamic renaissance. The fact that such a small institution is shouldering this immense responsibility deserves the utmost commendation from the community.

As you all stand poised to obtain your degrees and step into the realm of practical life, it seems fitting that I offer you some advice. To the young women here, in particular, the fervour with which you've

expressed your willingness to sacrifice everything for the propagation of Islam, and the plans you've outlined to spread awareness among Muslim women, might not seem as straightforward when put into practice. You may find that your own community, that is, the Muslim community, may not necessarily appreciate or endorse your dedication and good intentions. There could be resistance to the idea of you stepping beyond the traditional roles in the kitchen to raise the banner of Islam's dominance in the world.

You may also encounter opposition from those from whom you expected support, including family members. They may advise you, 'Daughter, while what you say may be true, society does not agree with your methods. Therefore, it may be better for you to temporarily abandon your plans.' I urge you to prepare for such criticism and challenges now so that you are ready to face them when they arise, ensuring you remain undeterred and unwavering in your path.

Keep in mind that you carry a weighty responsibility to disseminate the teachings of Islam and its revolutionary message. As for the religious concepts currently prevalent in Muslim society or the social restrictions, customs, and traditions widespread in our communities, they should be respected as long as they respect the message of Islam. Be wary of confusing the practices and rituals that Muslim society may have sanctified out of societal convenience or historical necessity for true Islam. God forbid, if such confusion arises, instead of being zealous advocates of Islam, you could unintentionally become advocates of an Indo-Islamic culture.

To elucidate this point further, consider the fact that our daily practice of Islam as Muslims sends a certain message to non-Muslims, leading them to believe that this is indeed the authentic expression of Islam. Therefore, our missteps and inaccuracies can project a distorted image of our religion to the outside world. This holds especially true for the concepts regarding women that have become deeply ingrained in our society, which are often mistaken for Islamic principles.

In your journey, strive to align your actions with the true teachings of Islam and distance yourselves from mere conventions.

These conventions, while long-standing in Muslim society and perhaps even held in reverence due to certain circumstances, should not be mistaken for the core tenets of our faith.

In our country, women have endured a debasing status for centuries. In Hindu society, women have typically been viewed as mere appendages to men. Aside from Islam, there is hardly any culture or religion that recognizes women as independent entities with their own distinct identities. Unfortunately, what has transpired in Indian Muslim society is a slow incorporation of non-Islamic perspectives on women. A general agreement emerged that women's potential is best realized within the confines of the kitchen, or that their abilities are best utilized for minor, miscellaneous household tasks. The notion that women could possess intellectual capacities equal to men, or make sound judgments, was largely dismissed. Such questions gradually faded from the collective consciousness of the Muslim community.

The neglect of women reached such a point that in traditional religious households, all resources were allocated towards the education of men, with women being deemed unworthy of such investments. If women's education was ever discussed within religious circles, it was agreed that women could receive a basic education at home, learning a bit of the Urdu language and developing the skills to read the Qur'an. However, this limited scope was often all that was envisioned for them. Notable scholar Ashraf Ali Thanwi even stipulated that this education should ideally be delivered by female teachers and offered free of charge. He believed that the acquisition of knowledge was its own reward.

The question of providing women with equal opportunities for higher education, similar to men, did not find favour even among the most progressive segments of our religious leadership. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, who is hailed as a leading advocate for Muslim education and spearheaded a movement for the educational upliftment of Muslims in the face of significant community opposition, did not accept the idea that women have an equal right to higher education. Sir Syed unequivocally stated that he was not prepared to educate women and

thereby make them aware of their rights under Islam. He argued, "Illiterate women are unaware of their rights and therefore they remain content. If they were to become educated and cognizant of their rights as women, their lives would turn into a nightmare."

When the most enlightened scholars in the community oppose women's education, primarily for fear that they might become aware of their rights under Islam, it provides an indication of the regressive attitudes held by those less enlightened. They might view any individual who seems learned based on outward appearance as a true representative of Islam, which can lead to numerous misconceptions about women's status in Islam.

On one hand, Muslim society has historically restricted women's access to education; on the other hand, we have the clear statement from Prophet Muhammad: "Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim, male and female."

The stark contrast between these two perspectives underscores the gap between traditional practices and the original teachings of Islam. This calls for a thorough reassessment of our societal norms and cultural practices, placing them under the lens of Islamic principles to ensure they align with the faith's fundamental teachings. Only then can we hope to reconcile these conflicting views and establish an environment that is truly conducive to the growth and empowerment of Muslim women.

The Muslim society in India has historically made significant efforts to prevent Muslim women from realizing their true societal status, and from becoming aware of their responsibilities in guiding society in the right direction. There was even a time, not too long ago, when religious scholars penned articles opposing the education of women, attempting to legitimize this stance with references to Islam and Shariah. Concepts completely alien to Islam were considered acceptable as measures of expedience or resolving spurious disputes.

A trend of self-styled interpretations began, on the basis of which, even the Quran, Sunnah, and many clear directives within them were seemingly abrogated. It was overlooked that no individual has the right

to add or subtract from the rights accorded to women by Allah and His Prophet. Some things might appear to us as disruptive to societal harmony, but Islam is the name of the religion that instructs us to "Accept whatever the Prophet gives you, and refrain from what he forbids."

Thus, it's crucial to approach our societal norms and customs through the lens of authentic Islamic teachings, not to permit cultural or societal norms to distort our understanding of Islam, particularly regarding women's rights and roles. Even if certain Islamic principles seem counterintuitive or disruptive to societal harmony from our perspective, we should remember that our understanding and perceptions are fallible and limited, while the wisdom of Allah and His Prophet is infallible and limitless.

When women are denied access to higher education and are confined within the boundaries of their homes, they are often unaware of the events unfolding in the world around them. As a result, their perspectives and voices are marginalized or deemed insignificant in worldly affairs. Naturally, this leads to a segment of society remaining uninformed and detached, oblivious to the challenges facing the Ummah and lacking insight on how to become valuable and effective members of it.

It's crucial to understand the significant implications of this situation. The children born to these women, who are often left uneducated and uninformed, may struggle to grasp or fulfil the profound mission of life. These mothers, through no fault of their own, but rather due to societal constraints and systemic issues, are inadvertently contributing to the stagnation of the Ummah.

It is thus crucial to rectify this situation by promoting women's education and involvement in society, recognizing their valuable perspectives, and ensuring that they are equipped with the knowledge and tools necessary to guide future generations toward understanding and fulfilling their roles within the Ummah.

Unfortunately, in our declining feudal society, false notions of honour have been mistakenly equated with Islamic principles. This

misunderstanding has perpetuated the stereotype of the ideal Muslim woman as one who is completely isolated from the outside world, with her individual identity essentially erased. It was considered a social taboo even to be familiar with her name. She was expected to remain unheard and unseen, her thoughts and feelings unknown.

Men controlled worldly affairs in this system, and women were expected to obey them unquestioningly, even when their directives were misguided. The voice of a man became the sole determinant of right and wrong, blurring the distinction between the two. Our most esteemed religious leaders encouraged this unquestioning obedience in women, further eroding the ability to discern truth from falsehood.

Women were denied the right to judge their husbands' directives in light of the Quran and the Sunnah, and to express reservations if they contradicted these sources of guidance. This expected obedience, although in no way reflective of Islam's true teachings, was presented to women as a religious demand. As a result, many mistakenly believed that Islam required such submissiveness from women.

Ashraf Ali Thanwi, a highly influential Muslim thinker, wrote the widely-read book, *Baheshti Zewar*, which has been deeply popular among Muslim women. For many, it has been regarded as the most reliable source of Islamic teachings after the Quran itself. However, this book too perpetuates the notion of blind obedience, instructing women to follow their husbands' commands without question. Thanwi writes, "Women should execute their husbands' orders without the slightest hesitation. Even if he asks her to move a heavy rock from one mountain to another, then to a third, she should be prepared to do so." He further writes, "If he declares day to be night, she should be prepared to agree."

In a society where such unquestioning obedience is considered a cornerstone of Islam, it becomes increasingly difficult for righteous women to emerge. The very distinction between right and wrong becomes progressively blurred, hindering the growth and development of strong, empowered women within the Muslim community. It is crucial that we recognize and challenge these misinterpretations, and

strive to accurately represent the teachings of Islam concerning women's roles and rights.

Dear sisters, it is crucial to understand that in Islam, men and women each hold distinct statuses and are individually accountable for their actions before Allah. On the Day of Judgment, one cannot escape accountability by attributing wrongful actions to the orders of a husband, brother, or father.

If, unfortunately, the male members of your family have strayed from the path of righteousness, it does not excuse any wrongdoing on your part. They are accountable for their actions, and you are accountable for yours. Indeed, in such circumstances, your responsibility becomes twofold: not only must you remain steadfast in your faith, but you must also endeavour to guide your family back onto the path of Islam. This is the true Islamic responsibility of a Muslim woman.

Should your husband or any family member engage in sinful behaviours or act against the commands of Allah and His Prophet, it is not appropriate for you to remain passive. The traditional expectation in some Muslim societies—that a wife should silently submit to her husband's wishes—is misguided. Regrettably, this notion is even propagated in some religious texts like *Baheshti Zewar* and others.

Maulana Thanwi wrote that if a husband is unfaithful, the wife should privately attempt to dissuade him. If he persists, she should patiently endure. He recounts a story of a woman from Lucknow whose husband openly carried on an affair with a prostitute. Despite initial protests, the wife eventually succumbed to her husband's demands, even cooking meals for his mistress. The townsfolk praised her for her loyalty, but such passive acceptance of wrongdoing is not in line with the Islamic image of a virtuous Muslim woman.

We must remember the clear command of the Prophet: "There can be no obedience in sinful matters". This means one should not obey orders that lead to sinful acts or compromise the teachings of Islam. Every Muslim woman is encouraged to uphold the teachings of Islam,

and never to be complacent in the face of wrongdoing, even when it comes from the closest family members.

Indeed, Islam envisions a pure and morally upright social system where each individual, fuelled by religious fervour, not only has the right but the obligation to guide others onto the path of righteousness. Age or gender do not limit this responsibility. Younger individuals can respectfully correct the older ones, and in matters of righteousness and avoiding sin, no distinction is made between men and women, young and old.

If for any reason your husband deviates from the correct path, it becomes your duty to make every effort to guide him back. It should never be the case that, in the name of conventional obedience, both of you end up on a path that leads away from righteousness. It's essential to remember that obedience in Islam doesn't mean blindly following orders, but rather adhering to the principles and teachings of our faith, even if it means disagreeing with those we hold dear when they stray from these principles.

Daughters of Islam, as you move from your education into practical life, you will frequently encounter prevailing misconceptions within Muslim society about women. You may often find that society tries to restrict you from performing actions that Islam not only permits but even encourages.

Consider the example from the Gulf War of 1991. In Riyadh, forty to fifty Muslim women took to the streets in their cars. While observing hijab, they indirectly demanded the right to drive. This action sparked a significant uproar in the conservative Muslim society of Saudi Arabia, leading to consultations, debates, and discussions among religious scholars.

I was present at one such assembly where heated discussions were taking place. I put forth an argument that a Saudi woman, under usual circumstances, is forced to go out with a foreign driver, a man who is a stranger to her. This situation occurs quite often when her husband is occupied at work. If women are allowed to drive while adhering to the guidelines of hijab, they would no longer need to depend on these

unfamiliar drivers. This, from a shariah perspective, is more favourable than the previous circumstance.

However, the scholars responded, 'You are correct. But the problem is that once women start to drive, we will not be able to control them anymore.' This reaction reflects how entrenched societal traditions can clash with the principles of Islam. In Saudi society, women were discouraged from driving due to long-held customs, while Islam permits women to engage in society as long as they observe the rules concerning hijab.

As you navigate through life, you might frequently confront situations where social norms contradict Islamic values. In these instances, you should have no hesitation in rejecting societal traditions that are inconsistent with Islamic principles, even in the face of substantial opposition. Upholding Islamic values should always be your guiding principle, regardless of societal pressures.

Your degrees, conferred today, symbolize this institution's faith in your ability to discern truth from untruth in light of the Book and the Sunnah. By the grace of Allah, you are now enlightened about the mandates of the Book and the Sunnah. It is essential for you to ascertain whether your actions align with the teachings of the Book and the Sunnah.

Indeed, your primary task is not to mistakenly equate long-standing traditions with Islam. When you have the definitive standards of the Book and the Sunnah at your disposal, you should employ these as your touchstones for evaluating all matters. Accept those aspects that pass this litmus test and reject those that do not align with the shariah, even if renowned Islamic scholars might have supported them.

This is because, for us, only the edicts of Allah and His Prophet serve as the ultimate authorities. The commandments of Allah and His Prophet should always guide our decisions, irrespective of other influences or pressures. You are now bearers of a torch that will illuminate the path to truth as guided by our faith. May you carry it forth with conviction, courage, and unwavering devotion to the teachings of Islam.

As you prepare to enter society armed with the education you've received, remember the importance of not letting other standards of judgement or even revered Islamic scholars overshadow the guidance provided by Allah's Book and the Sunnah of the Prophet. While you should learn from the insights of these esteemed scholars, the words of Allah and His Prophet must always be central when deciding on any matter.

You might encounter views from some well-respected Muslim thinkers that challenge your understanding due to their staunch adherence to traditions. This is your true test. You must critically analyse everything in the light of the Qur'an and the Sunnah rather than blindly accepting everything coming from reputed Muslim scholars as ultimate Islamic directives. This approach may lead you to interpret some directives differently from expected norms.

As a woman educated in the Book and the Sunnah, you may feel prepared to provide constructive advice to your husband in your everyday life. However, traditional religious perspectives may reject this role for you. For example, Imam Ghazali's book, *Ahya al-Uloom*, quotes Caliph Omer suggesting men should act against women's advice for blessings.

Despite the knowledge and competence you've gained from your studies to offer guidance in line with the Qur'an and the Sunnah, traditional religion may resist acknowledging this role for you. Furthermore, Imam Ghazali cites a statement about Hasan Basri, which implies a man who is subservient to his wife will be cast into hell. These kinds of statements, discouraging women from taking advisory roles, contradict the image of women in Islam.

On the contrary, the Prophet himself sought advice from his wife, Umme Salma, during a crucial moment in the battle at Hudaibiyah. When his companions felt discontent following the truce, it was Umme Salma who suggested that the Prophet lead by example and make the first animal sacrifice, inspiring others to follow suit. Her prediction proved correct.

Thus, we have on one side the Prophet's example, which values and acts upon the advice given by women, and on the other, traditional religious texts that dismiss women's counsel. As you step into society, be prepared to challenge such traditional views and assert the rightful place of women, as endorsed by Islam itself.

You should express gratitude to Allah for granting you access to the knowledge of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. In the current context of decay within Muslim society, you'll need to carve out your own path. By distinguishing the true essence of Faith from the weight of entrenched traditions, you will find it easier to progress forward.

Can a Muslim Woman lead Congregational Prayers?

The question of whether a Muslim woman can lead a Friday Congregation, especially when men are present, is currently causing significant debate in the Muslim world. Various scholars and influential figures are offering their perspectives on this critical jurisprudential issue.

Shaikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, renowned for his deep knowledge and standing within the Muslim community, has strongly opposed such a move. He views it as a deviation from the true Islamic path. Conversely, Shaikh Al-Azhar, along with other scholars, doesn't entirely reject the idea of women leading congregational prayers. However, they propose that a woman's imamhood should be restricted to all-female congregations.

Meanwhile, scholars from traditional schools of thought in Saudi Arabia and India have labelled the concept as sinful. They are aggrieved by the idea that amidst external threats to the Muslim world, these women are seemingly attacking the community from within. They question the timing and intent behind raising such a contentious issue, fearing it may inadvertently aid Islam's adversaries and plunge the Muslim community into a state of confusion and turmoil.

In order to properly address the question of whether a woman can lead a congregational prayer, we should not allow ourselves to become agitated. Instead, we should calmly consider the matter from an Islamic perspective.

When determining who is most suited to lead congregational prayers, Islam takes into account: (a) the individual's level of piety (taqwa); (b) their understanding and insight into the religion; and (c) their ability to recite the Qur'an with respect to both its phonetic and semantic aspects. The focus isn't on the individual's gender but on their qualifications, because the Qur'an does not endorse any form of racial or gender discrimination. It does not consider being a woman a demerit or disqualification, either socially or religiously. This is the Qur'anic perspective on the imamhood of women.

However, the perspective of jurists can be different. History is filled with examples where they have declared certain actions as 'strictly forbidden' (haram), even though they might only be 'undesirable' (mubah). These declarations were often made out of fear that perpetuating such 'undesirable' actions might cause problems within the community.

Consider the issue of women's entry into mosques, a fundamental social institution for Muslims. Throughout Islamic history, there have been provisions allowing women to enter mosques if necessary or expedient, a tradition that continues today at the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's mosque in Medina. Attempts by some rulers and Islamic scholars to ban the co-ed circumambulation of the Ka'ba proved unsuccessful.

However, in regions outside the sacred Hijaz site, local influences often swayed the jurists, who restricted women's societal roles. They did this in fear that women's increased independence and unrestricted mosque access might cause further discord in an already troubled Muslim society. Instead of improving the moral and spiritual condition of Muslim men, women were penalized and removed from central sites like mosques.

The narrative continues in an era of decline, where the Muslim community was consumed by despair. In an attempt to preserve the true essence of the religion, women were subjected to additional layers of hijab, beyond the mandatory veiling. As a result, the exposure of hands and face, which was deemed permissible in early Islam, and for which there are still supporting arguments in traditional and historical texts, was later deemed impermissible.

Although the exposure of the face remains a debated issue among Muslim scholars, a considerable portion of the Muslim community started considering face veiling as the most cautious interpretation of faith due to prevailing public sentiment. This cautionary stance stems from a belief that even if the entire body is covered and the face exposed, it could lead to societal mischief, especially in a society already in decline.

The cautious approach even extended to certain circles where it was considered inappropriate for strangers to hear a woman's voice. In some Muslim societies, revealing a woman's name or introducing them to others was considered contrary to Islamic values.

This precautionary philosophy caused significant harm to Muslim women. Its perpetuation for centuries rendered them faceless, voiceless, and stripped them of their identities. Consequently, they lost their social and religious roles as Muslim women. The emphasis of those attempting to stem the decline in the Muslim community became narrowly focused on controlling Muslim women, while the reformation of men's behaviour was sidelined.

Even today, those who oppose the social, political, and religious leadership of women on the grounds that it could incite discord and conflict are simply perpetuating this ancestral path that has, in reality, accelerated the community's decline.

The heart of Islamic belief is in self-surrender, a mandate equally expected from men and women. It is important to admit that Allah and His Prophet possess an incomparable understanding of what could cause turmoil in society and what actions or practices would uphold peace and equilibrium. If Allah had granted Muslim women the right

to engage in the social and religious life within the mosque, a right maintained by the Prophet during his lifetime, it is not our place to deprive women of this right after so many centuries based on our limited understanding of the faith.

Anyone studying Islamic history would know that in the Prophet's time, women moved freely, their identities were known, and they conducted business and trade. They were consulted on political matters during the era of the Pious Caliphs. Even a woman of humble background felt compelled and free to correct Caliph Omer's interpretation during a public sermon. With this relative openness during the initial stages of Islam in mind, the concept of a woman leading a congregational prayer doesn't seem so astonishing. In his 'Bahawalpur Lectures', Dr Hamidullah cites two such instances of women leading congregational prayers in the first century of Islam.

Even without these historical references, it shouldn't be difficult to understand that the Islamic standard of piety (taqwa), mandatory for anyone aspiring spiritual elevation, leaves no room for discrimination on the basis of race, region, skin colour, or gender. The Quran clearly states in verse 49:13:

"يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ"

(O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted). This implies that a person's virtuous actions cannot be disregarded or undervalued simply because they belong to a specific group or gender.

Similarly, verse 6:164 affirms:

"وَلَا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ وَإِنْ تَدْعُ مُثْقَلَةٌ إِلَىٰ جُنْدِيهَا لَا يُحْمَلُ مِنْهُ شَيْءٌ وَلَوْ كَانَ ذَا قُرْبَىٰ إِنَّمَا تُنذِرُ الَّذِينَ يَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُم بِالْغَيْبِ وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَمَنْ تَزَكَّىٰ فَإِنَّمَا يَتَزَكَّىٰ لِنَفْسِهِ وَإِلَى اللَّهِ الْمَصِيرُ"

(And no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another. And if a heavily laden soul calls [another] to [carry some of] its load, nothing of it will be carried, even if he should be a close relative. You can only

warn those who fear their Lord unseen and have established prayer. And whoever purifies himself only purifies himself for [the benefit of] his soul. And to Allah is the destination).

Each person will face the consequences of their actions, and their rewards will reflect their deeds; any external identities will be futile. When the principle of صبغة الله (Take the colour of Allah) is to be applied equally to men and women, it becomes illogical for a man to leverage his 'manhood' to claim superiority over a woman who might be more pious and righteous.

The Quran condemns such powerful individuals as the Pharaoh and Abu Lahab, while praising entire communities, such as the people of Saba under the truthful Queen of Saba. It underscores that any birth-given distinction of gender, colour, race, or region is irrelevant. Instead, the value lies in one's virtuous actions or practices (amal-e-saalih). This is the primary determining factor of a Muslim's position in Islamic society. The Quran further encourages that even virtuous individuals from other communities should be respected, and their good deeds won't be overlooked.

Adhering to a book that repeatedly nullifies all unnatural distinctions of colour, race, gender, territory, and ethnicity and that emphasizes that only one's good deeds will matter on the Day of Judgment, no God-fearing person should dare to declare someone else a sinner or hell-bound. That judgement is exclusively Allah's to make.

From the state of being entirely powerless (symbolized by the phrase "بأي ذنب قتلت" or "for what crime she was killed") to the stage of religious and political leadership, women have traversed a long journey. The Prophet's movement to restore human dignity has had profound implications not only for Muslims but also for the underprivileged sections of societies belonging to other religions, even those residing in remote corners of the world. This movement has lifted families suffering for generations under the burden of usury, and gradually led to the eradication of slavery. Likewise, it terminated the brutal tradition of subjugating women to men.

The revolutionary proclamation that "believing men and women are helpers of one another" (9:71):

"وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتُ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ يَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَيُطِيعُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ أُولَئِكَ سَيَرْحَمُهُمُ اللَّهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ"

sparked the realization that in the path of total surrender to Allah, men and women would be equal partners.

The transformative foundations laid during the time of the Prophet were not designed to bear fruit instantly or within his lifetime. If this had been the case, the final Prophet's mission and the history of subsequent periods would lose a substantial amount of their importance. Those who argue that developments not apparent during the Prophet's life shouldn't have appeared in later eras, or who contend that acts not performed in his era but carried out later should be seen as omens of an impending apocalypse, are failing to grasp the profound nature of the concept of the last Prophet, as well as the timeless essence of the Qur'an.

Consider the Qur'an's directives regarding the kind treatment of slaves. These can't be applied in today's world because the institution of slavery no longer exists. However, it's clear that the Qur'an's persistent calls for compassionate treatment and eventual emancipation of slaves ultimately contributed to the gradual eradication of this institution. This marked the beginning of a major social revolution, the real effects of which became visible not at the moment of revelation but many years later.

Similarly, upon reading the Qur'an's instructions about zakat (charity), no one should mistakenly believe it aims to perpetuate poverty. Instead, it advocates for generosity to aid in poverty alleviation.

Parallel to these themes is the Qur'an's introduction of gender equality during the Prophet's time. This teaching inevitably led to women asserting their deserved place in society, based on their knowledge and piety, in the following years. The groundwork that Islam laid for women's empowerment has had profound and far-reaching effects, extending beyond Muslim societies.

The Western movement for women's emancipation, their societal and political participation, the right to express individual opinions, and guarantees for personal freedom didn't suddenly appear without a backstory. Instead, these advances have been influenced by the revolutionary impact initiated by the Prophet, which reached the West through centuries of cultural exchange. However, due to their neglect of divine revelation, the West now faces the excesses of uncontrolled individual freedom.

Human society is perpetually evolving, and the momentum for human rights initiated by the Prophet in Mecca was truly unstoppable. Those who believe that human history was static until the advent of the Magna Carta or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are simply revealing their own limited understanding. Contemporary concerns about preserving human rights and dignity – whether they involve preventing nuclear destruction, conserving the environment, preserving endangered animal species, tackling air pollution, or maintaining the natural warmth of the oceans – can all be traced back to the teachings of the Prophet.

In today's Muslim societies, if women feel they have been marginalized by patriarchal structures and are endeavouring to reclaim their rightful places – even to the extent of leading congregational prayers – this should not be viewed as a foreign concept given the historical trajectory of Islam. Instead of treating these developments as alien to our cultural heritage, we should strive to understand them within a broader perspective.

It's true that in the course of any human practice – including the spirit of competition in goodness embodied by the instruction "compete with each other in good acts and try to take precedence in it" (فاستبقوا الخيرات) – there can be excesses. However, these should not cause undue alarm, as corrections can be made. If we hastily dismiss these efforts as plots by enemies of Islam or as misguided ideas from misdirected Muslims, we'll fail to truly comprehend the issue. Instead, we should aim for thoughtful engagement and considered understanding.

Throughout the fourteen centuries of Islamic history, instances of women serving as imams leading congregational prayers have been rare exceptions rather than a steady tradition. Yet, it's noteworthy that Muslim men have mostly accepted women in critical roles such as jurists, thinkers, and educators.

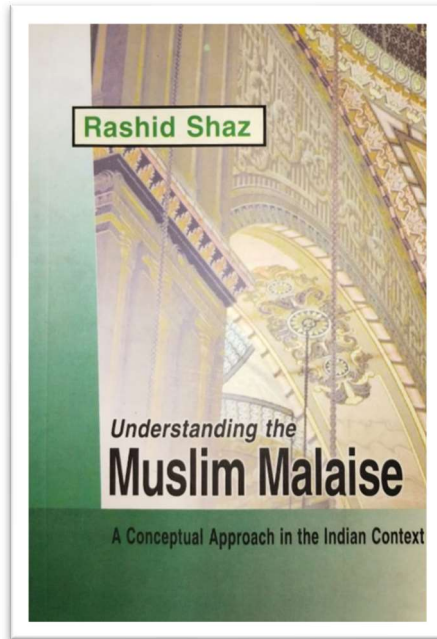
If we acknowledge the idea that not all effects of the Islamic movement were immediate during the Prophet's era, and that some impacts became clear in the ensuing years and centuries, we might perceive the issue of women's claim to imamat from a fresh angle. We must remember that the creation of a global society founded on the Prophet's teachings is an ongoing project—the enduring mission for the last Prophet and his followers. So, instead of dismissing women's pursuit of imamat as a threat or a harbinger of an apocalyptic future, we should evaluate it in light of the Qur'an's teachings.

Some who view women's claim to imamat as detrimental seem hesitant to examine the matter using the Qur'an's insights. For these individuals, the final word on every issue is the interpretations and rulings of ancient scholars, and any debate or reconsideration of these pronouncements is perceived as disruptive. This viewpoint, however, contradicts the future-oriented spirit of Islam, a religion intended to guide humanity until the Last Hour. To make it subordinate to the interpretations of scholars from the past would be to stifle the ongoing message of the Divine Revelation and its primary objectives.

Unfortunately, many Muslims have tended to regard the Qur'an more as a book of blessings than one of contemplation and reflection. We should acknowledge that our forebears were as human as we are, susceptible to misinterpretations of divine verses, prone to error in deriving commandments, reconciling conflicting traditions, and making intuitive or expedient decisions. There is no obligation on us to shoulder the weight of their errors. Surely, our own mistakes should be sufficient for concern, without the added burden of those from the past.

The urgent requirement is to move beyond the boundaries of traditional jurisprudence and address this intricate, sensitive, and

crucial issue, taking into account Islam's journey of evolution over fourteen centuries. However, it is essential for the new generation of thinkers to maintain a sceptical stance towards both the old system of jurisprudence and the contemporary social and political influences upon it, and to avoid as far as possible succumbing to the pressures of current societal and political trends and thoughts.



This book is about a devastating tragedy that befell the Muslims in post-'47 India. In the pages that follow one gets acquainted with a revolutionary Ummah which, in its ideological wilderness, shuns its idealism and is eventually swallowed up by a seemingly neutral ideology of secularism. This conversion of Muslim Indians, from Islam to secularism, though in itself a clear case of apostasy, has otherwise gone unnoticed.

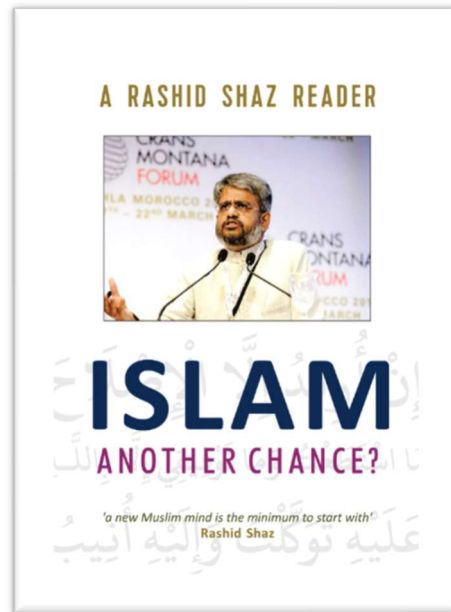
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(from the Editor's Preface)

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